

CINEFANTASTIQUE

February

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Co-producer and star Wesley Snipes, bringing Marvel's vampire hunter to the big screen.

BLADE

THE BORROWERS
DEEP RISING
NICK FURY:
AGENT OF SHIELD

THE SCIENCE FICTION FILMS OF ROBERT WISE

Volume 29 Number 10



CINEFANTASTIQUE

Buffy, Vampire Slayer

THE REVIEW OF HORROR FANTASY & SCIENCE FICTION, YOUR GENRE NEWS MONTHLY

CINEFANTASTIQUE is published each and every month, with issues jam-packed with the latest stories on the hottest films you want to see.

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Plus, in the same issue, the making of Michael Crichton's *SPHERE*, an on-the-set report of the filming with interviews that include Crichton, director Barry Levinson, and the film's cast and crew, with a look at the movie's mind-boggling special effects. Also previews of *LOST IN SPACE: THE MOVIE* and *SPECIES 2*, plus all the latest news and reviews!

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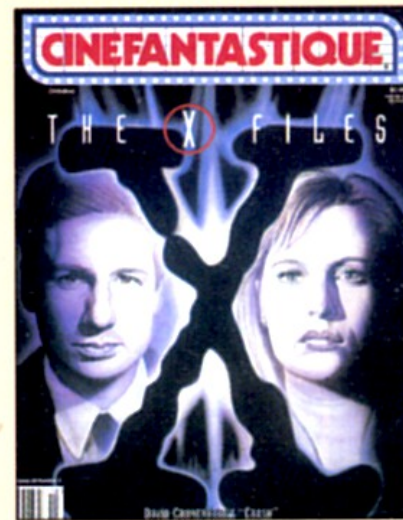
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"The Magazine with a Sense of Wonder"

FEBRUARY 1998

Welcome to our cover story on the making of *BLADE*, the adaptation of the long-running Marvel Comics character. Thanks to a delay in the release of the film (from February to August), this is truly an advanced preview issue, but that doesn't alter the fact that we are in the middle of a glut of comic book-to-film adaptations. Hollywood, always eager to follow a trend, is convinced that there are big bucks to be made from adapting those four-color fantasies, of which *BLADE* is only the most recent to make the transition. Sometimes they are right: *SUPERMAN* was big in the 1970s, and *BATMAN* was even bigger in the 1980s. Last year, the biggest blockbuster of them all was *MEN IN BLACK*, which of course was based on a comic book.

What's buried beneath all this success is the fact that the actual ratio of winners-to-losers is low. For every hit, there are half a dozen bombs like *TANK GIRL*, *JUDGE DREDD*, *BARB WIRE*, and *STEEL*. But like a gambler convinced that he will hit the jackpot if he just keeps feeding money into the machine, Hollywood persists. One can hardly blame them, considering the potential rewards. But the problem is that, in order to try to turn these properties into hits, too much of what made them interesting in the first place is glossed over, resulting in a generic, comic-book style that degrades the medium.

Fortunately, the mini-major and independent studios have been a little more willing to leave the rough edges on, to allow the personality of the original work to show through, even if it is dark and disturbing. Thus we have had mid-level success stories like *THE CROW* and *SPAWN*—films which might not have reached blockbuster status but which nevertheless far outperformed the majority of the major studios' costly mistakes. Since *BLADE* comes from New Line, not one of the Hollywood biggies, we can only hope that the adventures of vampire slayer will reach the screen somewhat intact, and that the film will go on to beat the odds that have defeated so many other adaptations.

Steve Biodrowski



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Publisher & Editor: Frederick S. Clarke. **West Coast Editor:** Steve Biodrowski. **Bureaus:** New York/ Dan Persons, Dan Scapperotti. Los Angeles/ Douglas Eby. London/ Alan Jones. **Contributors:** Frank Barron, Sonya Burres, Douglas Eby, David Evans, Sue Feinberg, Dennis Fischer, Lawrence French, Frank Garcia, Desiré Gonzales, Judd Hollander, Patrick Hobby, Dale Kutzera, Michael Lyons, Patricia Moir, Jay Stevenson, Frederick C. Szebin, John Thonen, Chuck Wagner, Paul Wardle, David Wilt. **Editorial Operations Manager:** Elaine Fiedler. **Editorial Production:** Lisa Tomczak-Walkington, David Bellm. **Publisher's Assistant:** Lisa Coduto. **Circulation:** Faith Redding. **Business Manager:** Celeste Casey Clarke.

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EAGERLY AWAITED

GODZILLA (TriStar)

The trailers have been wowing audiences for months (one features a hapless fisherman who hooks a bigger catch than he ever imagined possible). That's right: GODZILLA is stomping towards a theatre near you. What convinced Roland Emmerich and Dean Devlin that a big-budget remake of Japan's most famous export would be a good follow-up to their blockbuster success with ID4? The answer according to Devlin lies with an earlier, abandoned version of the project: "When Jan DeBont got involved, he developed a really good script," said Devlin, referring to the treatment by Ted Elliot & Terry Rossio. "Even though we decided to abandon that script and go a completely different direction, what it did tell us was that it can be done elegantly and you can do it straight. And when I say straight, I mean still with a lot of humor, but respectfully."

Chuck Wagner

May 22



RELEASE SCHEDULE

Upcoming cinefantastique at a glance, along with a word or two for the discriminating viewer.

compiled by Jay Stevenson
(unless otherwise noted)

BLADE (New Line)

August

This film was planned for a February release, hence our cover story. Now it turns out New Line will not be releasing it until August. SEE PAGE 16.

THE BUTCHER BOY (WB)

January

After a brief, limited run last year to qualify for Academy Awards, this Neil Jordan film receives a wider release. Eamonn Owens plays a small boy in an Irish town who retreats into the fragmented comic-book world of his dreams in order to escape the harsh realities of his real life. Stephen Rea co-stars, and Sinead O'Connor shows up as a foul-mouthed Virgin Mary.



DARK EMPIRE (New Line)

January

This futuristic film noir pushed back from 1997. Alex Proyas (THE CROW) directs Rufus Sewell, William Hurt (ALTERED STATES), Richard O'Brien (THE ROCKY HORROR PICTURE SHOW), Jennifer Connelly and Kiefer Sutherland co-star. SEE CFQ 29:4:40.

EDEN (Water Street)

January 30

Joanna Going (PHANTOMS) plays a beautiful '60s housewife in this subdued art house effort, written and directed by Howard Goldberg. She has the wisdom, education, and enthusiasm to make a great college professor, but two things stand in her way: her husband won't hear of it, and she is physically challenged by multiple sclerosis. Oppressed both physically and mentally by her situation, she finds a unique avenue of escape: astral projection. The whole thing is presented in a metaphoric rather than literal manner, but the effect is quite intriguing, and the beautiful Going does a credible job of proving she's a real actress, not just a pretty face. Dylan Walsh and Sean Patrick Flanery co-star.

FALLEN (WB)

January 16

"Time is on my side," sings the fallen angel in this supernatural thriller. (Is songwriter Jerry Ragavoy still

around to collect royalties for this lyric, popularized in the recording by the Rolling Stones?) However, this demonic presence, whom we first meet in the body of a serial killer (Elias Koteas, previously seen opposing fallen angels in THE PROPHECY), is not the sort to take his time. Remember what a gradual process possession was in THE EXORCIST? Well, this demon instantly jumps from body to body, rather like Horace Pinker in Wes Craven's SHOCKER. This makes all kinds of trouble for homicide cop (Denzel Washington), who realizes that the m.o. of the executed killer is being repeated, and he is apparently being targeted for revenge. SEE PAGE 12.

NIGHT WATCH

(Dimension)

February/March

It's not official yet, but this film is the front runner as the longest running entry in our Release Schedule, having first appeared over a year ago in issue #28:4-5. Advanced word has actually been favorable on this psycho-thriller, so why don't they just release the damn thing?

PHANTOMS (Dimension)

January 30

Following the tradition they established with NIGHT-WATCH, Dimension Films quietly abandoned the announced October release of this film last year and rescheduled it for January. Apparently, they were afraid of going head-to-head with I KNOW WHAT YOU DID LAST SUMMER, from Kevin Williamson, who scripted SCREAM and its sequel for Dimension. Guess the Halloween horror season just isn't big enough for two horror hits. (Then again, THE DEVIL'S ADVOCATE didn't do too badly by opening at the same time.)

SPHERE (WB)

February 13

Barry Levinson's film, from the Michael Crichton novel, reaches theatres in February, having moved back from the over-crowded Christmas season. Although Crichton did not work on the script, he does take a producer credit, and the result looks like a faithful adaptation. Let's hope it turns out better than the lamentable LOST WORLD: JURASSIC PARK. SEE PAGE 14.

STAR KID (Trimark)

January 16

Taking a leaf from Dimension's book, Trimark Pictures has been delaying the release of this juvenile fantasy flick since last April. Surprisingly, the film (originally titled THE WARRIOR OF WAVERLY STREET) is not bad. Let's hope all the delays place the film in a niche where it can find its audience. REVIEWED ON PAGE 53.



UNCENSORED ANIMATION

GENERAL CHAOS (Manga)

Entries by Bolex Brothers and Bill Plympton distinguish GENERAL CHAOS: UNCENSORED ANIMATION, a collection of adult-oriented short subjects. Several entries are quite impressive; unfortunately, the quality level varies wildly. The Plympton shorts, grouped under the overall heading "Sex and Violence," are hilarious; but the festival's linking sequences, featuring the "General Chaos" character, are weak, and some entries are real losers, like "American Flatulators," which is not only stupid and unfunny—it isn't even animation! (Well, okay, there's a bit of rotoscoping in the live-action short, but that hardly qualifies it for entry here.) Don't let that put you off attending this anthology, however, which is the first of a proposed annual festival; it does contain some fine selections (e.g., "Junky," about a stop-motion parrot who suffers through some humiliating degradation in order to get his "fix," a cracker). Just remember there will be opportunities to sneak up to the concession stand. Starting in January, the anthology moves regionally through the art house circuit.

January/February



HOLLYWOOD GOTHIC

COWBOYS AND ALIENS

Coming off the success of MIB, another sci-fi comic book adaptation.

by Judd Hollander
& Sue Feinberg

Scott Mitchell Rosenberg has one of the more interesting jobs in the entertainment industry. Owner of 50% of Platinum Studios, Europe's premiere house for worldwide comic book rights, he looks for concepts that have cinematic potential to develop and sell to movie and TV companies. Currently, he has several projects in development, including **COWBOYS AND ALIENS**, which he created himself.

COWBOYS AND ALIENS has the core theme of many of Rosenberg's projects: everyday characters thrust into impossible situations. In this case, an alien spacecraft crashes in the American West, circa 1880. In order to survive, cowboys and Indians join forces against these invaders, using their own technology against them. As Rosenberg sees it, it goes back to the cowboys and Indians games kids have been playing for over 100 years. "Everybody loves shooting at aliens, and everyone loves being an alien. I think after seeing this movie, kids are going to be playing 'Cowboys and Aliens,' whether it's with official merchandise, or just doing their



In **COWBOYS AND ALIENS**, the old movie clichés are overturned as cowboys and Indians team up to fight extraterrestrial invaders in the 1880s.

own thing." The project will be produced by Rosenberg and Steve Oedekerck (co-writer of the **NUTTY PROFESSOR** remake).

Rosenberg's first sale came in 1991: as owner of Malibu Comics, he sold "The Men In Black" to Columbia Pictures and Amblin Entertainment. "Everyone laughed when

I wanted to do that as a comic, because it went against what sells in the domestic comic book market. However, I thought first-time comic writer Lowell Cunningham created a brilliant concept, and I decided to take a chance on him." **MEN IN BLACK**, of course, went on to become 1997's biggest blockbuster.

Rosenberg founded Malibu in 1986 "because of my geeky love of comic books and science fiction." In 1993, the company launched their own universe of superheros called the "Ultraverse." Out of that, came *Prime*, the story of a 13-year-old boy, who morphs into a twenty-something superhero, which is currently being developed as a feature at Universal. There's also *Night Man*, a jazz player who, after an accident, is able to hear evil thoughts. Rosenberg is executive producer on both projects and is partnered with sci-fi veteran Glen Larson on **NIGHT MAN** (reviewed this issue).

Despite his success, Rosenberg grew discontented with limitations in the U.S. comic book marketplace and sold Malibu to Marvel Comics in 1994. After the expiration of a non-competition agreement, he acquired half interest in Platinum Studios and became chairman of the group's U.S. entertainment division. Rosenberg looks for projects that have franchise (i.e. sequel) potential. "[When] I was growing up, I was a comic and sci-fi fan. And once I like a character, I want to keep seeing more of it, so I'll gravitate towards novels that have the same characters in them, or [sequels] of movies. That's why I liked comic books—because they keep going. When I approach filmmaking, it's from the standpoint of 'what do I like?' I'm going to spend 20 hours a day working on [a project] once we get into production, so I should love it."

IRON MAN

by Mike Lyons

With **SPACE JAM** under their belt and **QUEST FOR CAMELOT** ready to bow next summer, Warner Bros. Feature Animation recently started another project, **THE IRON GIANT**. Based on the 1968 novel, *The Iron Man* by Ted Hughes, the film will tell the story of a giant metal robot that terrorizes a small town upon its arrival until a young boy befriends the machine, whose purpose, apparently, is to destroy weapons of war. The story has never been told on screen, but in 1989 The Who's Pete Townshend released an album of songs based on the story that was later translated into a stage musical. The film version will be directed by Brad Bird, most famous for his work on the animated **FAMILY DOG** episode of Steven Spielberg's **AMAZING STORIES** TV-series, as well as numerous episodes of **THE SIMPSONS**; Bird also co-wrote the live-action film **BATTERIES NOT INCLUDED**. The film will be produced by Allison Abbate (**SPACE JAM**) and Des McAnuff, who brought Townshend's rock opera *The Who's Tommy* to the Broadway stage a few years ago. No release date is set. □

Production Starts



BEOWULF

Christopher Lambert, the big star overseas who for some reason can't sell tickets in the U.S., takes the lead in this science-fiction adventure, directed by Graham Baker (**THE FINAL CONFLICT**, **ALIEN NATION**).

FROM DUSK TILL DAWN: HANGMAN'S DAUGHTER

The sequel to the overly anticipated teaming of Quentin Tarantino and Robert Rodriguez is now filming in South America, with little of the big-name talent that distinguished the first film. Michael Parks and Marco Leonardi are top billed; P.J. Pesce directs. Tarantino and Rodriguez take exec producer credits, and Rodriguez and his brother Alvara penned the script.

Short Notes

Barry Sonnenfeld (**MEN IN BLACK**) has had Touchstone Pictures purchase the rights to an unwritten novel, *Vespers*, based on a 15-page treatment by author Jeff Roven. Screenwriters David Weissberg and Doug Cook (who collaborated together on **THE ROCK**) have already been hired to adapt the story, which involves a pair of giant bats with wing spans of 30 feet, who nest inside the Statue of Liberty. ☞ DreamWorks' **Larry Katzenberg** and **Steven Spielberg** have shelled out \$3 million for **BAD DOG**, a werewolf horror-comedy script from Dale Launer (**RUTHLESS PEOPLE**). ☞ **Phillip Noyce** (**CLEAR AND PRESENT DANGER**) is attached to direct **BLAST OFF** for Polygram/Interscope Films. The script, by J.D. Shapiro, A. William Dozier and Michael Schiffer, is a science-fiction adventure set on board the first International Space Station, which is commandeered by one of its crew members who wreaks havoc on Earth by sabotaging satellites that control everything from cell phones to ballistic missiles. □

LOST WORLD REDISCOVERED Obituaries

The Doyle novel, filmed already thrice, will now be filmed again—twice.

by Frank Barron
and Jay Stevenson

Although no credit is given on either the book or the film derived from it, genre enthusiasts know that Michael Crichton's novel *The Lost World* borrowed its title from an earlier book by Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, which was previously filmed twice for theatres and once for TV. In the wake of the blockbuster success of Steven Spielberg's film *THE LOST WORLD: JURASSIC PARK*, two new adaptations of the Doyle classic are being made, no doubt to cash in on the title. In Montreal, Bob Keen (responsible for the makeup effects in such Clive Barker films as *HELLRAISER* and *NIGHTBREED*) is directing a feature-length version that will star Patrick Bergen as Professor Challenger. Meanwhile, in Calgary, Canada, John Landis is prepping a two-hour pilot for a TV series based on the property.

THE LOST WORLD is one of two series that Landis and his partner Leslie Belzberg are preparing; the other is the Buena Vista family sitcom *HONEY, I SHRUNK THE KIDS*, which is a one-hour production based on the feature film. The episodes will take place in various places and times in history, but mainly in a light, humorous vein. Buena Vista TV is distributing the series worldwide, with a minimum of 22 episodes already set.



Irwin Allen was responsible for the second adaptation of *THE LOST WORLD*, a disappointing effort that abandoned stop-motion in favor of enlarged lizards.

Landis and Belzberg took an old warehouse-type structure in Calgary, Canada, and converted it into a sound stage. Exteriors are made to look like Denver—the supposed site of the *KIDS*' family. Since there is much special effects work on the series, the producers are heavily into digital computer work, "making it easier to produce the effects," said Landis, who added that he preferred syndication rather than network airing for the series, "so we can retain control."

Landis and Belzberg are readying *THE LOST WORLD* as a syndicated one-hour action-adventure series, with a commitment for 22

episodes. The show will debut in 1998 as a two-hour movie, then movie into a one-hour time slot. The adventure yarn, from the creator of Sherlock Holmes, was first adapted as a silent film in 1925, with Wallace Beery as Professor Challenger and with stop-motion effects by KING KONG's Willis O'Brien. It was remade by Irwin Allen in 1960, with Claude Rains (*THE INVISIBLE MAN*), Michael Rennie (*THE DAY THE EARTH STOOD STILL*) and Jill St. John fending off optically enlarged lizards. The previous TV version, a four-hour opus starring John Rhys-Davies and David Warner, was produced by the notorious Harry Allan Towers in 1993 and released in two-parts as *THE LOST WORLD* and *RETURN TO THE LOST WORLD*.

Curiously, Landis had hoped to film a big screen version of the Doyle novel at Universal Studios, but his plans came an end when the studio opted instead to film another dino-opus. "We actually had a great script by Richard Matheson to do *THE LOST WORLD*, with Sean Connery as Professor Challenger," said Landis. "We were going to do a very traditional, old-fashioned adaptation of Wells' [sic] book. Unfortunately, it was in development at Universal, and they bought *Jurassic Park*. They said, 'We don't want to do *THE LOST WORLD*; we want to do the rip-off of *THE LOST WORLD*!'"

John Ashley

The 62-year-old producer died of a heart attack on the set of his latest feature film, *SCARRED CITY*. He first gained fame as an actor in AIP flicks of the '60s, like *BEACH PARTY* and *BEACH BLANKET BINGO*, and later became a successful producer of TV shows like *THE A-TEAM* and *WALKER TEXAS RANGER*. But he is known to genre fans for his roles in such films as *HOW TO MAKE A MONSTER* (1958), *FRANKENSTEIN'S DAUGHTER* (1959), *THE TWILIGHT PEOPLE* (1972), and *BEYOND ATLANTIS* (1973); he co-produced the latter two with director Eddie Romero. For television, he also produced the science-fiction oriented show *SOMETHING IS OUT THERE*. **Jay Stevenson**

Samuel A. Peeples

The writer of the second *STAR TREK* pilot (the one that actually got the original show on the air), died on August 25. Although Gene Roddenberry conceived *TREK*, Peeples' script had a lot to do with shaping the show as it came to be known. Along with the late Gene L. Coon (who produced many of the best episodes), Peeples deserves a lot of credit that's generally attributed to Roddenberry. **Patrick Hobby**

Carlos Enrique Taboada

The screenwriter-turned-director died of a heart attack in Mexico City on April 15, 1997; he was 67. His feature writing credits include the four-film *NOSTRADAMUS* vampire series (1959), *THE WITCH'S MIRROR* and *ORLAK, THE HELL OF FRANKENSTEIN* (both 1960). He also directed several fantasy films, including *VENENO PARA LAS HADAS/POISON FOR THE FAIRIES* (1984), which won Ariel awards (Mexico's equivalent of the Oscar) for Best Picture and Best Direction. **David Wilt**

Screaming till Dawn

Ubiquitous *SCREAM* scribe Kevin Williamson is teaming up with *FROM DUSK TILL DAWN* director Robert Rodriguez to make a science-fiction horror film for Dimension Films, Miramax's genre division. Rodriguez will direct the as-yet-untitled script by Williamson, which involves a group of high school students in Texas. Dimension is planning a March start date, in order to get the film out by Christmas 1998—filling the holiday horror slot the company established with *SCREAM* in 1996 and followed up with *SCREAM 2* in 1997. Williamson has revitalized the box office (if not exactly the art) of the horror film with his hits *SCREAM* and *I KNOW WHAT YOU DID LAST SUMMER*; the new film should stick close to the formula. "We're both big fans of the teen horror genre," Rodriguez told *Daily Variety*, "and I'm happy to...work with Kevin." Meanwhile, Williamson is planning to make his directorial debut on *KILLING MRS TINGLE*, which also begins filming in March for Dimension, with whom the writer has a long-term contract. Rodriguez also has another project with the company: he co-wrote the prequel to *FROM DUSK TILL DAWN*, which is subtitled *HANGMAN'S DAUGHTER*. □

Production Starts UNTITLED BABE SEQUEL

The delightful talking pig returns (with a new voice) in this sequel to the sleeper hit of 1995. James Cromwell is back as Farmer Hoggett, this time joined by Mickey Rooney. George Miller, who produced and co-wrote the original, fulfills those duties again, in addition to moving into the director's chair. (Originally announced as *BABE IN METROPOLIS*—you think Superman makes a cameo?)

THE AVENGERS

The classic British spy show is reborn for the big screen.

Ralph Fiennes dons a pin-stripe suit and bowler hat as John Steed, and Uma Thurman slips into tight leather and kinky boots as Mrs. Emma Peel in *THE AVENGERS*, the 1998 summer blockbuster from Warner Bros, based on the cult Sixties British television show.

Shot during the Summer of 1997 at both Pinewood and Shepperton Studios in London, which housed the enormous sets, plus a host of luxurious country houses around England, the multi-million dollar romantic fantasy pits Steed, the quintessential English gentleman, and Mrs. Peel, his cool, stylish partner, in tongue-in-cheek espionage against the deadly villain Sir August de Wynter, whose ability to manipulate the world's weather from his Top Secret hi-tech underground facility makes him the most powerful man on earth.

Sean Connery is de Wynter, the first time the former James Bond has ever played a villain on screen. Other cast members include Jim (*THE BORROWERS*) Broadbent, Fiona Shaw, British comedian Eddie Izzard, Eileen Atkins—and Patrick MacNee, the original Steed, in an unusual cameo. Diana Rigg, the second (after Honor Blackman) and most famous female sidekick on the show, declined to appear.

Set in 1999 in a heightened reality 'Avengersland'—where the fads, fashions and ideals of

the '60s have never ended; they've just been absorbed by sophisticated '90s culture—the movie, according to producer Jerry Weintraub, "is a whole new approach to the action adventure genre. The characters are people you care about, and we have a terrific cast. It's the most exciting film I've ever made! Sure, the action we've devised is extraordinary, but if this film works and generates the business I'm sure it will do, I believe audiences will want more of Steed and Peel. That's why I've been so character-orientated with the script; the action plot is secondary. The Bond films have continued because people like the character, and the same will apply here—only twice over."

Sharing Weintraub's 12-year commitment to the project is director Jeremiah Chechik, whose credits include the recent *DIABOLIQUE* remake. It was on the last day of shooting that Sharon Stone chiller that Chechik received the first script of *THE AVENGERS*. He said, "I loved what I read, and I've kept myself free to direct it since then. I'm a huge fan of the TV series because of the rich and unusual characters playing out a fantastic romance set against an enormous, stylish background. The idea of making a big action movie that has at its heart two fascinating char-



Uma Thurman and Ralph Fiennes replace Diana Rigg and Patrick Macnee as Emma Peel and John Steed in the big-screen version of *THE AVENGERS*.

acters and a devious villain was everything I could hope for in a movie that I desperately wanted to see. So I had to make it."

So did production designer Stuart Craig, who devised a look that combines bubble cars, E-type Jaguars and other Swinging '60s icons with a very futuristic ambience. Craig won an Academy Award for the last Ralph Fiennes movie he designed—*THE ENGLISH PATIENT*—and cited the varied influences for his magnificent sets. "The TV series was the original inspiration, but we've also gone to painters like Magritte and de Chirico. The series was made on a shoestring, and in a very witty way they managed to turn dereliction, empty spaces, and no extras into a virtue ending up with a very surreal world."

In one of the many stylistic nods to the series, the only extras seen are those who wear uniforms in their daily lives—policemen, traffic wardens, the armed forces, milkmen, etc. With Craig's 'Avengersland'—including MI5's underwater headquarters (inspired by Winston Churchill's wartime bunker), the monumental steel and glass Prospero Project set, and de Wynter's base of operations—*THE AVENGERS* movie is set to dazzle the eye in a unique way. Chechik added, "I've enjoyed myself every day working on this amazing film, and that's been down to Jerry Weintraub, who has made all the toys we needed to play with readily available. The mood on set has been wonderful from Day One because our enthusiasm has been energized by his commitment to making *THE AVENGERS* the best movie it can possibly be." □

PREVIEW BY ALAN JONES

THE BORROWERS

Translating literary little people to the big screen.

By Alan Jones

Mary Norton's 1952 book *The Borrowers* has already formed the basis of a 1973 American telemovie and a 1992/93 BBC series starring Ian Holm, Penelope Wilton and Rebecca Callard. Working Title's *THE BORROWERS*, the latest incarnation of Norton's books (which include *The Borrowers Afield* and *The Borrowers Avenged*), charts the trials and tribulations of the four-inch-tall Clock family as they embark on a battle of wits and danger to save their home. The Lenders, the "human bean" family above them, upon whom their livelihoods depend, face wrongful eviction by the scheming lawyer Ocius Potter, and the Clocks must act fast if they are to stop his dastardly plan to demolish their property. John Goodman is Potter; Jim Broadbent (*BULLETS OVER BROADWAY*) and Celia Imrie are Pod and Homily Clock, while Flora Newbigin and Tom Felton play

their children. Polygram Filmed Entertainment (who scored a hit with their debut release, *THE GAME*) will release the film.

Shot on location at London's Kew Gardens, Ealing Town Hall, and the village of Theale in Berkshire beginning September 25, 1996, *THE BORROWERS* moved into Shepperton Studios for the rest of its 18 week schedule. There, five sound stages were used to house the magnificent oversized sets utilizing giant props from 15-inch paper clips and 10-foot tall toasters to huge vacuum cleaners and enormous waste paper baskets. Such sights as large scale models of John Goodman's feet, gargantuan store rooms, humongous toys, and a 70-foot refrigerator ensured a constant stream of amazed visitors to the sets.

It was producer Tim Bevan, of Working Title, who gave director Peter Hewitt *THE BORROWERS* script in late 1995. "Their success with the television series had made them think in terms of re-inventing the sto-



ry for a big budget feature, and he let me have the script to read. I've always been intrigued by little people movies anyway; I love *THE INCREDIBLE SHRINKING MAN*, *HONEY I SHRUNK THE KIDS*, and *INDIAN IN THE CUPBOARD*. Originally the movie was going to be set and shot in America, and the script reflected that. But I thought it contained some kernels of great ideas, and I decided to develop the script over the first few months of 1996 to what it is now."

Hewitt continued, "I loved the idea of an action-adventure movie set by a chair leg or over by the trash can—the most insignificant actions for humans become the most cataclysmic events for the Borrowers. The changes I made to the script mainly reined in the story to those basics, so I wanted most of the action to take place in the Lenders' home. Originally, the house they were all going to move to was in another town. I localized it to a few streets away so it was five minutes walk for a human but a foreign country to the Borrowers. I felt it was important to focus on actions with major consequences for the teeny people that we don't even think about."

Equally important to Hewitt was the inclusion of "impossible sequences" in the script. He explained, "I wanted it to seem like we actually had four-inch actors and didn't use any special effects tricks at all. That became an exercise in letting our imaginations run loose without any technical concern initially, then trying to solve the problems afterwards. For example, it was vitally important to me that we saw a Borrower in a human-sized room and they are just there and on screen for a long time. The camera doesn't cut; they go wherever they want to go completely uninhibited, and the

The tiny Clock family (the "Borrowers" of the title) live in the floorboards underneath a "human bean" home.





camera moves with them. Such sequences became exercises in applying the best techniques. One sequence we've shot outlines what I mean. The human boy Pete (Bradley Pierce) suspects there are little people in his house and lays traps for them. He finally captures Arrietty in a tin and tips her into a fish bowl where they have a conversation. That entire scene came out of a brainstorming session we had about what could Pete trap Arrietty in where we could still see them talk to each other. The sequence came out of what we thought would be the most visually interesting setting for a quiet moment when Pete told Arrietty who he was and they got to know each other, and we had to see them clearly doing this. After deciding to do it that way, it became a monumentally awkward task to film as I wanted the camera to move as well. So Bradley has her in the tin; he tips her into the fish bowl—where Flora Newbigin falls six feet onto rubber foreign coins—and then the camera tracks all around them as they speak to each other. We doggedly worked it all out shot by shot to make it as seamless as possible. The proof of the pudding is, when you watch the scene, Arrietty is just there. What special effects? What tricks? There is no trick. The trick is we had a four-inch actress."

Hewitt researched how the world would be optically perceived by a four-inch-tall person. He remarked, "I thought at one stage of going to the Oxford Scientific research facility and asking how they filmed insects for nature documentaries. It seemed vital to shoot scenes with little people that would retain their littleness. After a while it became a crashing bore, and I finally decided that wasn't of key importance. Being teeny weeny was secondary to what the Borrowers say and do. They had to primarily be cheeky,



Left John Goodman's scheming lawyer captures one of THE BORROWERS. Above: one of the oversized sets utilized in the \$30-million film from Working Title, the company responsible for LOCH NESS.

funny, and likeable. When I first spoke to actress Celia Imrie about that approach she suddenly said, 'Oh, I see—magic, not logic.' That expressed it so well it has become our motto ever since. If it tells the story and looks great, we've done it."

Before beginning THE BORROWERS, Hewitt did watch a few "little people" movies again just to see how other directors had approached the inherent problems. "But I never watched the original TV series of THE BORROWERS, although I did meet the producer and chatted about what they'd done. I even watched episodes of LAND OF THE GIANTS to see what not to do. But you know something? I ended up doing it anyway! I thought I'd never end up gluing a wide-angled camera to the ground and watching a human hand come towards the lens. But it is extremely effective. On another show they had a human reaching down to scoop up one of the characters. Oh, here it comes, I thought—cut to an awful rubber hand. But, again, it looked really good, and it convinced me you could get away with oversize props in some situations."

Hewitt added, "Oversize props don't look right, ever, because they are too big and have too much detail." Nevertheless, he realized they could be a blessing rather than a curse. "Science lost and magic won out when it clicked that audiences enjoy these big sets. It's the 'Wow, they really built that!' factor. This production has almost become like the Universal Studio tour because so many people have wanted to see our giant replicas of household goods. We're keeping a lot of the props for promotional use at the time of release because of that curiosity. Everything on these giant sets is pin sharp from close up to infinity which of course wouldn't be the case in reality. Depth of field means the background would go into soft focus naturally. That was the only issue we had to think about when we were putting an oversized shot next to a real

one. I ensured we cushioned the possible visual blow by cutting to some intermediary shot in between."

Mary Norton wrote *The Borrowers* in the '50s, in a postwar Britain where borrowing, because of rationing, was a way of life. Hewitt therefore thought it was necessary to set the film in a timeless era—one both '50s, yet with a contemporary feel. "It's set in its own locale of anywhere, any-when—not quite now, but not quite then. THE BORROWERS' world is a weird one of vintage cars, red brick houses and mobile phones...a sort of retro Metropolis. Norton's tale has an enduring appeal because I think we are all fascinated by little people. Look at our cultural myths, fables and literature: leprechauns, fairies at the bottom of the garden, goblins, gnomes, Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs etc. THE BORROWERS taps into that vein." □

Director Peter Hewitt (BILL AND TED'S BOGUS JOURNEY) confers with actress Flora Newbigin, who plays Arrietty, one of the Clock children.



D

It's "ALIEN on

By Douglas Eby

Stephen Sommers has directed children and animals in *THE ADVENTURES OF HUCK FINN* and *THE JUNGLE BOOK*, but for *DEEP RISING* he found himself working with a different kind of "star": the computer-generated deep-sea creatures that rise up to attack a luxury cruise ship on its maiden voyage. Sommers was inspired to write the script after reading a *National Geographic* magazine about jellyfish, with pictures of victims: "It severely scars you if you just touch these things; it will burn your skin right off, practically. Just reading that sparked the idea for the whole movie." Hollywood Pictures release the film, which stars Treat Williams and Famke Janssen as the hapless human beset by monsters from the deep.

The "ghastly and fearsome tentacled creatures," as the production notes describe them, were designed by Rob Bottin (*LEG-END*), who provided the sculptures used as the basis for the CG creatures. In keeping with his initial inspiration, Sommers noted that the animals he and Bottin developed were "based on real life creatures; we just exaggerated and combined several animals. The main creature we took it after is literally called the vampire squid. Instead of suction cups, it has fangs, so it's really nasty and creepy, and the way it moves is really disgusting. Another was the bell jellyfish, because it's one of the most venomous creatures on the planet. We melded those two creatures together and said, 'At ten thousand feet they're this big; can you imagine at forty thousand feet how big they could get?' The creatures down at thirty-five and forty thousand feet are so weird; you've got fish with little light bulbs hanging off their heads. I thought, no matter what I come up with, it will probably be not much weirder than what's down there."

Although mechanical and miniature effects were used for other purposes, the creatures themselves were realized entirely with CGI, courtesy of ILM and Dream Quest Images. As a director, Sommers thinks the principal challenge of working with CGI is "mainly patience. It takes a long time. I learned a lot on this movie, and I'm lucky because Dean Cundey [*WHO FRAMED*



Top: Treat Williams (*THE PHANTOM*) explores a derelict vessel inhabited by a monster. Center: Famke Janssen (*GOLDENEYE*) co-stars. Bottom: one of the sea-monster's on-board victims.



DEEP RISING

the Water" in this ocean-going sci-fi tale.

ROGER RABBIT] did a good portion of the second unit. He's worked on a million special effects movies, so when someone would say 'Oh, I don't think we can do that,' Cundey would say, 'Yeah, they can do that.' And we'd just do it."

Sommers added, "Every project has its own unique challenges. On this movie, the complexity was having so many mechanical effects and special effects. But I love working with actors. That's the real fun part. All the mechanical and special effects and stunts are really great, but when it comes right down to it, the most fun is sitting down with actors and working with them, instead of having 50 mechanical effects guys and 25 stunt men."

For the role of smuggler and ship captain John J. Finnegan, Sommers' opted for Treat Williams: "People said, 'Don't you want Bruce Willis?' But the stars of this movie are the creatures, and you need great actors to pull it off. If you don't believe the actors, you're not going to believe the movie. I think that was the fault of many of the '50s horror movies: the acting was so bad, the only thing you could get into sometimes was the special effects. And the movies that really stood out in the '50s were the ones that had good acting. It was the same thing when I got Anthony Heald to play the ship's owner: Anthony is a fantastic actor and so experienced. You always get the script to a certain point, and then you need the actors to pick it up and take it away, to improve the dialogue and improve the characters."

One of those who picked up the script was Famke Janssen (LORD OF ILLUSIONS), who played Trillian, one of the few survivors left on board the luxury liner after its attack by the swarm of deadly deep-sea creatures. She had to walk the tightrope of living up to Stephen Sommers' description of her jewel thief character: "She's really feminine and sexy, but tough and strong as any of the guys, and you buy her as a real smart girl." Janssen said, "Even if it weren't written like that, I would



Stephen Sommers (THE JUNGLE BOOK) directs DEEP RISING from his own script, which was originally titled TENTACLES, opening February 13.

always try to bring some of those elements to the character. But that's definitely what we were going after, because there's a lot of guys in the movie; it's all guys and me. So it was very important that I wasn't going to be like the 'poor pathetic female,' needing to be protected by them. But also, I don't like when in movies you have these females that all of a sudden become these super-humans. I just wanted to make sure there was a good balance. You still want to keep the characters you play feminine, but at the same time you want to give them strength and intelligence."

Accordingly, Janssen noted, Trillian is unlike her role in the latest James Bond adventure: "She's nothing like that. Trillian is softer. And Xenia in GOLDENEYE wasn't a real character, so there's a lot of qualities I didn't have to give her, because it was sort of a fantasy part, a cartoon character. But this one is realistic, so that's why at times I had to make her scared, when a normal human being would have been scared. And of course, Xenia didn't really have those fears. Actually, it was really fun to play Xenia just because once you get into that realm of fantasy, there's no limitations of what you can do as an actor—no place that is too far to go. Of course, when you start playing the realistic characters, all of a sudden you have restrictions you have to work within. I like

freedom, personally."

Like other actors in DEEP RISING, Janssen had to imagine the creatures she was battling, because the CGI effects weren't added until post-production. "You just have to rely on your director to say what you do, or 'go bigger' because the thing's really scary," she said. "It's hard, because you always think, 'Wait a minute. The audience needs to respond, not me. If I respond that much, there's nothing left for the audience to do. So that's always a struggle, and you never know whether you succeeded or not until it's on the screen, and you see the whole thing put together."

Regarding such scenes, Sommers added, "I have to be very specific, because I don't want them to overact or to underplay the moment. You have to get it just so: when their faces are lighting up and they're screaming, the audience will be responding. It's hard for an actor, because they're just looking up and seeing nothing, just a piece of tape on the wall. That's happening a lot in movies, and actors are getting more and more used to it, but they do have to trust the director. Like Treat Williams said to me one day, 'Oh, God. SAG is going to come by and take away my actors card.' They're getting nervous."

DEEP RISING was a "forty-five million dollar lesson in how to make special effects movies," said Sommers. "I have a theory about this: all through the '40s and '50s, special effects were pretty much ahead: Ray Harryhausen was ahead of the audience; people were just mesmerized by his effects. And sometime in the '60s, audiences became smarter than the special effects, and they had to start hiding the effects. ALIEN works great, not showing the creature, at that point in our film history. For a while people were saying 'less is better,' but now with LOST WORLD and with JURASSIC PARK, more is better—they didn't try to hide the creatures. Special effects are again ahead of the audience. Now they want to see the damn creature, and if you hide it, they feel cheated." □



Dan Scapperotti

Is it time for a reawakening of intelligent horror films? Director Gregory Hoblit (*PRIMAL FEAR*) thinks so, and he's out to prove it with *FALLEN*, a demonic tale pitting a police detective against the forces of evil. (Hoblit is no stranger to police drama, having garnered nine Emmys for directing episodes of *NYPD BLUE*, *HILL STREET BLUES* and *L.A. LAW*.) *FALLEN* stars Denzel Washington, John Goodman, Donald Sutherland, and Embeth Davidtz.

The title refers to the angels who were cast out of Heaven along with Lucifer. That ageless evil still exists, this time seeking vengeance against homicide detective, John Hobbes, (Washington). Hobbes, along with his partner, Jonesy (Goodman) apprehend Reese, a vicious serial killer, and witness his execution. That would seem the end of it, but the next day another murder victim shows up with striking similarities to the Reese killings. Soon, Hobbes finds himself enmeshed in a series of terrifying events, and circumstantial evidence begins to point to Hobbes as the killer.

Hoblit was working with screenwriter Nicholas Kazan on an adaptation of James Elroy's novel *The Big Nowhere* when Kazan suggested he read *FALLEN*, a script Kazan had penned with Alan Dershowitz. So impressed was the director that immediately after reading the screenplay he agreed to the project.

"I've enjoyed movies of the supernatural since I was a kid," said Hoblit. "This one had elements that reminded me of the intelligence behind *ROSEMARY'S BABY*, *THE OMEN*, and *THE EXORCIST*. I also liked the chance to mix genres. I spent a fair amount of time doing cop-based television, and I know a fair amount about that world. The chance to mix that with a supernatural

FALLEN

Gregory Hoblit on directing a demonic police procedural.

genre was fascinating to me."

Since the success of the film hinges on limiting the suspension of disbelief required to access the supernatural aspects of the story, Hoblit's credentials seemed essential. "I probably was a good idea," he admitted, "because of my familiarity with police procedure. It was extremely important to me—and, I think, to Nick Kazan and producer Charles Roven—that we got it right. The more credible, the more honest, the more believable, the more unassailable the behavior of the cops, the more you're going to believe what they're doing when they enter the world of the supernatural—this world which is alien and foreign and is peculiar and frightening to some people. On the other side of it, I needed, because of how my head works, to make very sure that the supernatural world that Nick had devised was logical—that there were rules, that if a good cop such as John Hobbes took all of his intuitive skills, all of his experience, all of his taught skills and applied them logically to catching the bad guy, then he would have a chance. The only way that he would have a chance is if the bad guy has rules that it plays by—you just can't have this guy do anything it wants. What Hobbes finds out very quickly is that no matter how skilled he is, no matter how experienced he is, he's dealing with something outside of the realm

of anything he's ever come up against before, and he needs help in trying to figure it out because it's beyond anything in his experience. But once he begins to piece it together, he can then begin to lay a trap. We spent a lot of time getting the script to make that possibility a sure thing."

Defending his decision to create an unseen enemy rather than a lumbering monster, writer Nick Kazan said, "In real life, when someone is about to do something nasty to you, likely as not you can't tell. So evil in real life is hidden. In Hollywood, where there are a lot of nasty people, it's a form of praise to say someone will stab you in the chest, because it means they're not going to stab you in the back. So I think that the reason why unseen evil is so terrifying is because it corresponds with reality."

Hoblit promises enough twists and turns to keep the audience guessing, especially toward the end. A song that the condemned Reese hums at his execution, runs throughout the film: Rolling Stones' "Time is on My Side." The tune becomes sort of the demon's taunting theme song. He's been around for thousands of years, and he's got time to wait, as he flits from host to host leaving devastation in his wake. "The demon can move by touch and by spirit," said Hoblit. "If whoever the demon resides in dies, the demon can move into the air, float

Top: Hobbes (Denzel Washington) searches for clues to the nature and identity of a demonic killer who appears to have survived an execution Hobbes attended with his boss (Donald Sutherland, below).





Left: Hobbes consults with Gretta (Embeth Davidtz), a woman who has devoted her life to studying the demonic power he is chasing. Above: Hobbes and his police partner, played by John Goodman.

around, find another victim who looks attractive, and drop in and begin to function in that person. If he wishes to move by touch, from person A to person B, he can do that as well. If he was in me and I was sitting next to you and I touched you, you were it. And anything the demon does while in you, you do. Whether you kill somebody or cause a wreck or steal something, when he leaves you you're standing there having done whatever you've done with the demon in you, but he's no longer in you; he's somewhere else."

Splashy effects sequences were not to be a part of the film. Instead, opticals were used sparingly to present the world of the demon. "Sometimes we had to do effects to make it work," said Hoblit, "and sometimes it was just the film stock that I used that we had to process very carefully. I had to find a visual language for the demon. Nick wrote a wonderful character who spoke in a very compelling and mysterious way. I had to find a visual language for this creature that you never see except personified by whatever person it's in. I had to find a visual language for his point of view of the world. I felt going in that the movie should feel real and possible. This is not Freddy Kruger running around with a funny face and a hatchet or a knife. The less you gimmick things up, the more people will buy into what you're doing."

For the director, the combination of Kazan's solid script and Denzel Washington's credibility make *FALLEN* a supernatural thriller with a sound reality base, and special effects would just get in the way. "Denzel brings a weight of believability that's striking," he said. "When you see his character, as he begins to go from realizing

that something weird is happening, to when he's realizing the only way he's going to catch this person is believing what it can do, then you really follow it. If you get taken out of it with kind of junky excessive effects, it would erode the credibility of the whole movie."

Hollywood sound stages and the precincts of such cities as New York were bypassed by the production which spent most of the 55-day shooting schedule in the Philadelphia. Hoblit felt that he had spent enough time in New York while shooting *NYPD BLUE* and that the location had been over-exposed. "It takes place in any Eastern industrial city," said Hoblit. "I picked Philadelphia because I wanted to see stuff I haven't seen before, and Philadelphia is this big town with all kinds of nooks and crannies that were so fresh to my eye. We didn't want to identify any one city, because if it's Chicago, if it's New York, even Philadelphia specifically, people watching the movie go 'Oh, that's happening over there. That's not my problem.' But if it could be any city, it could be where you live, which is much more interesting than

Director Gregory Hoblit (*PRIMAL FEAR*) said Nicholas Kazan's script combined "the intelligence of *ROSEMARY'S BABY*, *THE OMEN* and *THE EXORCIST*."



just locating him in some specific place."

A name on a wall near the first killing leads Hobbes' investigation to Gretta, played by Embeth Davidtz, a woman whose past may hold the key to the strange events plaguing the detective. After the mysterious suicide of her father, Gretta devoted her life to the study of theology to soak up as much knowledge of devils, demons and angels as she could against the day when she might need it. "She knew her father committed suicide thirty years ago because he got tangled up with the same demon," said Hoblit. "She knows a lot, but she's reluctant to tell Hobbes. She's the key that he needs to figure out what's going on. Embeth is a wonderful actress and is kind of unconventionally beautiful. At the same time there's a certain etherealness to her. I felt very strongly that the daughter of this cop who had committed suicide under very unusual and frightening circumstances should have a certain haunted quality. She's spent her life with this knowledge. It has ruined her mother. Embeth had just the requisite qualities for the character."

While Hoblit describes the film as a supernatural thriller with a brain, he hasn't neglected the action. "While it's very heady in many ways," he said, "I like to think there are some very nice set pieces that involve our characters chasing a whiff of smoke or being chased by a whiff of smoke. When Denzel sets out after somebody that the demon is in two minutes later at the end of the chase it's been through five or six other people and is in somebody now who you didn't even know about before the chase began. If, at the end of the movie, people get up and look to the right and look to the left and say 'Gee, I'm not touching that person,' it will have succeeded as a movie and we would all have had a little bit of fun." □

SPHERE

Film adaptation of Michael Crichton's novel takes us into the abyss once more.

By Lawrence French

"My problem with doing science-fiction movies has always been I don't know how to deal with the monster," admitted Barry Levinson. But when Levinson read Michael Crichton's *Sphere* shortly after directing *DISCLOSURE* (an adaptation of another Crichton book), he found it was the kind of science-fiction story he had been looking for. "I saw it as the *WHO'S AFRAID OF VIRGINIA WOOLF* of science-fiction movies," he explained. "It's really a psychological drama, played out on the ocean floor, where you keep thinking there's going to be a monster, but the monster never shows up. It's ultimately the human characters who are the monsters, which is why I found it interesting. If it were that other kind of science-fiction movie, I would have been uncomfortable making it." Warner Bros. will release the undersea thriller on February 13th.

Levinson, known for his outstanding work with actors in such films as *SLEEPERS* and *THE NATURAL*, has once again assembled a stellar cast, led by Dustin Hoffman as Dr. Norman Goodman, a civilian psychologist. Dr. Goodman is brought in by Naval authorities after a buried spaceship is discovered on the floor of the Pacific Ocean. Hoffman's role is the antithesis of the typical action hero. He depends far more on his intellect and much less on heroics, when things go awry under the sea. Sharon Stone (*TOTAL RECALL*) plays Beth Halperin, a brilliant biochemist, who has trusted Norman's guidance in the past but begins to doubt his motives during the investigation of the mysterious spacecraft. Samuel L. Jackson (*JURASSIC PARK*) plays Harry Adams, a highly logical mathematician, who tends towards the skeptical side of the alien life equation. Peter Coyote (*E.T.*) is Barnes, the government official in charge of documenting the spacecraft, and Liev Schreiber (*SCREAM 2*) rounds out the cast of scientists as Ted Fielding, an ebullient astrophysicist who views the possibili-



Director Barry Levinson rehearses a scene with Sharon Stone as Beth Halperin, a bio-chemist who starts to crack after the discovery of the sphere.

ty of alien life as the greatest scientific discovery since Copernicus.

Andrew Wald, who is producing *SPHERE* along with Michael Crichton, recalls he first tried to interest Warner Bros. in the movie back in 1993, while he was producing *DISCLOSURE*. "I told the studio that the science-fiction arena was going to make a swing back," Wald related, "because the pendulum had swung away from it, and I also felt that *SPHERE* was one of Michael's most intelligent books. It's an interesting action-adventure story with characters you really care about. The studio said, 'We want to wait and do *SPHERE* after *JURASSIC PARK* is out'. Then, after we finished working on *DISCLOSURE*, Barry read the book, and said, 'Yes, I'm interested,' because he'd been looking for a good science-fiction story. That's when everyone got excited, and the project started to move ahead."

Although Michael Crichton is co-producing the film, he elected not to write the script. "Michael felt it would be a rather difficult translation to the screen," Wald revealed. "The novel is all told from the point-of-view of our main character, Norman. Michael said, 'I enjoyed writing the book, where I could present all of Norman's internal thoughts, but I can't do that for the movie.' So all of those kinds of thoughts and emotions had to be translated from the

pages of the novel into a workable screenplay, and it's been an arduous route. It's taken us two years and four screenwriters to come up with something that has pleased everyone. Our first problem was to distill all the action in the book into a motion picture format. Then we had to make the science-fiction elements seem like part of everyday life. We couldn't stop and explain every detail of how the airlock works or how they access the log on the spaceship. That needed to be a part of the background to the movie, so we could keep our main focus on the characters. That's what Barry always wanted to emphasize. At the end of the movie, you

have three people who must depend on each other to survive, but they no longer trust each other. So it's those kinds of psychological twists and turns we wanted to stress, not the scientific hardware. Ultimately, [scriptwriters] Stephen Hauser and Paul Attanasio did a very faithful adaptation of Michael's book."

Crichton, whose biggest film success was Steven Spielberg's version of *JURASSIC PARK*, relied on inspiration from an earlier Spielberg film while writing *Sphere*. "Part of Michael's take on the story," revealed Wald, "was, 'What if E.T. came to Earth and wasn't friendly?' Here, the scientists discover a sphere inside the spaceship, and they don't know what to make of it or how to get inside of it, until one of them, a brilliant mathematician, uses his deductive logic to enter the sphere. Afterwards, they bring him back into their underwater living quarters, but the answer should have been: don't bring him back; leave him there in the spaceship. It's the classic science-fiction concept of something picked-up that's better left alone. There's also a lot of scientific conjecture Michael talks about, such as what if an alien creature came to Earth and inhaled oxygen but exhaled cyanide gas. They'd have no way of realizing they were dangerous to us."

Wald was able to learn from some of the costly mishaps and delays that have



The scientific-military team crosses the ocean floor, looking for a crashed space ship where they will discover the "sphere" of the title, an inexplicable alien artifact.

plagued previous films with ocean settings, like *THE ABYSS*, *WATERWORLD*, and most recently the *TITANIC*. "We went to school on at least two of those films, and learned that the more control over the water you have, the better off you'll be," noted Wald. "The key was being able to shoot in controlled tanks. We built five tanks on a stage, so we could filter and heat the water. Then we took pieces of our sets and put them in the tanks. One tank had the airlock in it; another tank had our mini-sub and the

sub-dome hangar. Then, as a practical concern as well as a safety concern, we never put the actors in a depth greater than one atmosphere, which meant they could be diving all day and never have to decompress. So the route we're taking gives us a great deal of freedom, as well as control. In *THE ABYSS*, Jim Cameron went a lot deeper than we are, which meant people had to decompress when they came up. In *WATERWORLD* they were out on the ocean, and whenever you do that it's going to multiply

your problems, because you have very little control over Mother Nature."

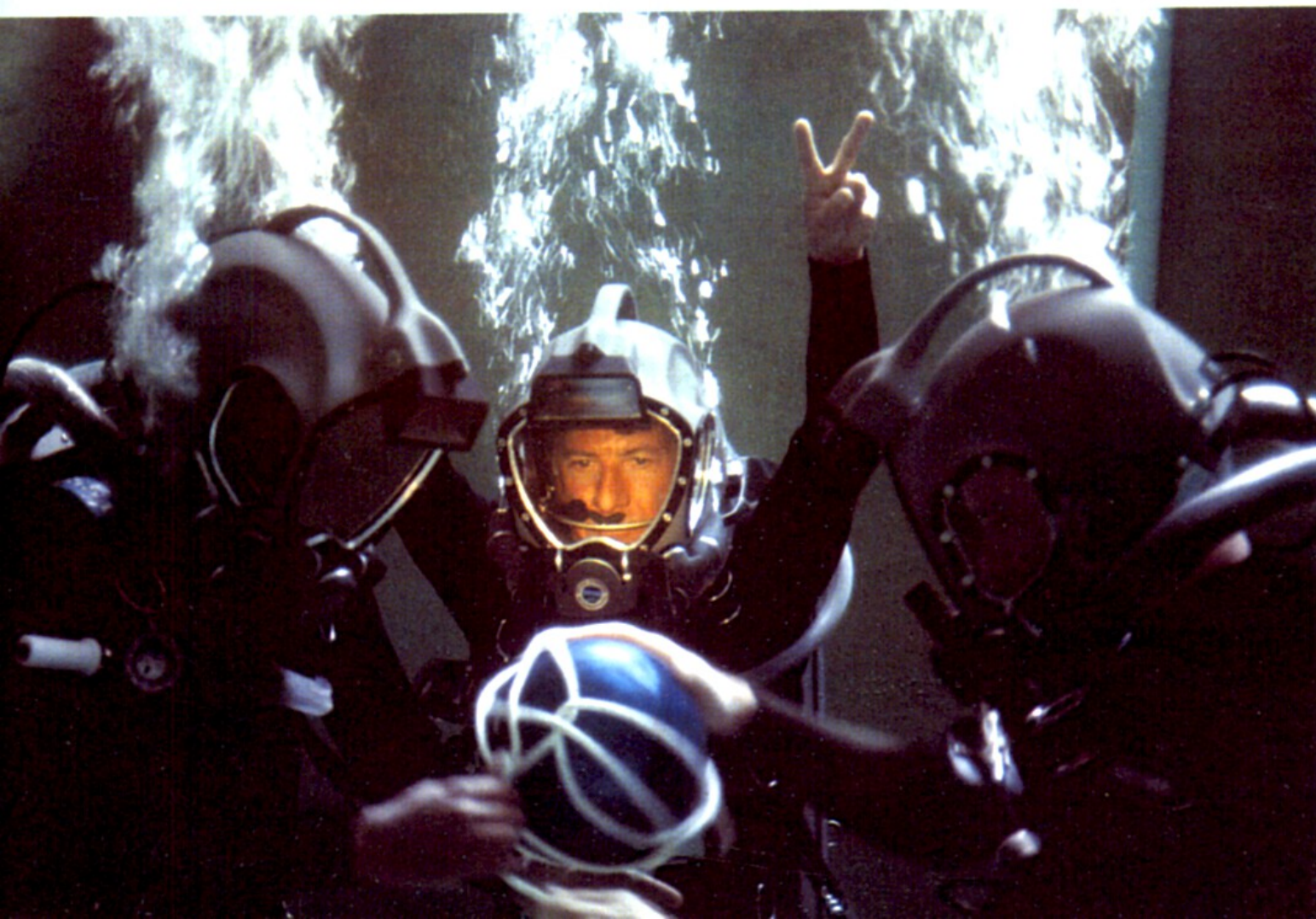
Wald also managed to contain costs by shooting with a second unit, where all of the underwater action was done by stunt doubles. "During our pre-production, it became obvious that we didn't need to have our principal actors underwater for six weeks," said Wald. "That meant after we saw the film the second unit shot, we could go in and get exactly what we needed from the first unit. We were able to pick-up the shots only when you really need to know that it's Dustin Hoffman or Sharon Stone."

Although stunt doubles lessened the underwater work for the actors, they still had to spend significant amounts of time in the studio tanks. "They all spent two weeks training with a diving instructor and during their training became a very close-knit group of people," said Wald. "I think that helped the level of drama and interaction to the characters. They all learned very quickly, and everyone went on to become fully certified in scuba diving."

Although *SPHERE* may seem reminiscent of *THE ABYSS*, Crichton's novel not only pre-dated that film, it may have actually influenced James Cameron. Wald claims he isn't worried about the inevitable comparisons that will be made. "In our story we have a chance to address a number of unique issues," said Wald. "I think audiences are looking for something they haven't seen before, and our undersea setting lends itself to that. We know less about

continued on page 61

Dustin Hoffman plays Dr. Norman Goodman, a psychologist who assists the undersea expedition.



BLADE

Marvel's urban anti-vampire assassin jumps and kicks his way to the big screen.



Wesley Snipes is Blade, the semi-vampire scourge of the undead, who hunts the beings responsible for his condition with sword and stake. N'Bushe Wright plays hematologist Karen Jansen, who seeks to cure Blade of his vampire proclivities.

In a cruel twist of fate, a mortal woman is bitten by a vampire at the very moment of giving birth. Their umbilical blood separated before the child could be completely infected, the boy grew to inhabit a nether world—neither human nor vampire—an outcast from both societies, bent on destroying the immortal villains who murdered his mother and condemned him to a life of bloodshed, loneliness, and misery. His name is Blade.

After thousands of stories and novels, hundreds of feature films, and even a soap opera, the vampire genre enters what may be its final incarnation before the end of the millennium: a neo-gothic action film. Based on the long-lived Marvel Comics character

**BY DALE
KUTZERA**



Top: Blade dispatches a vampire opponent in a fiery blaze—the film's action-adventure format leaves little room for staking vampires lying passive in their coffins. **Below:** Blade's vampire nemesis, Deacon Frost, played by Stephen Dorff.





Snipes gets to show off his facility at swordplay in the new film in a confrontation with Stephen Dorff's upstart vampire, Deacon Frost.

created by Marv Wolfman (see article on page 24), **BLADE** stars Wesley Snipes as one of the first African-American super heroes. Snipes (**DEMOLITION MAN**) is joined by Stephen Dorff (**BLOOD AND WINE**) as the villainous Deacon Frost, and Kris Kristofferson (**LONE STAR**) as the mentor Abraham Whistler. N'Bushe Wright (**DEAD PRESIDENTS**)

co-stars as an unwitting sidekick, Dr. Karen Jansen. New Line plans to open the film in August, after postponing its debut in January for re-editing.

Blade has been high on the list of Marvel characters to be brought to the big screen. In what may be a flood of superhero projects, the film is at the forefront of a wave that may include **SUPERMAN LIVES**

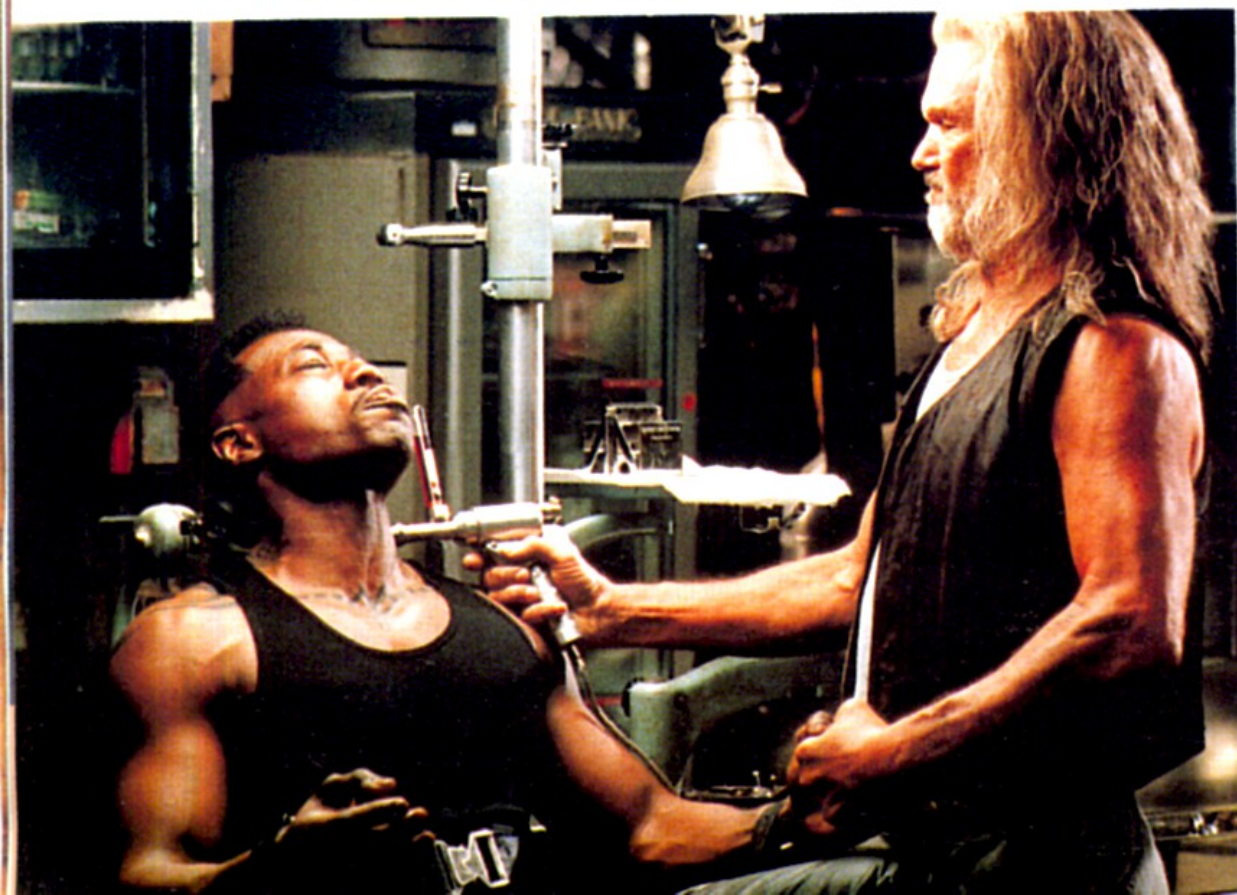
(starring Nicholas Cage, directed by Tim Burton) **SPIDER-MAN**, **THE FANTASTIC FOUR**, **THE X-MEN** (from Donner/Schuler Productions, written by Ed Solomon), **THE INCREDIBLE HULK**, **IRON MAN** and **SILVER SURFER**. The number of these projects that actually make it to the screen may depend on the box office of **BLADE**.

That a comparatively obscure character (he was seen only intermittently in print throughout the 1980s) is the first to go before the cameras is simply a factor of all the elements coming together. The primary element was a screenplay that Marvel Comics guru Stan Lee (now head of Marvel Entertainment Group, Marvel's motion picture arm) and New Line Cinema's Michael DeLuca could rally behind. "What happens with these movies is that a distributor or studio decides to do one, and then everything depends on the right script," said Lee. "We've had **THE FANTASTIC FOUR** in the works for quite a while. And **THE IN-**

CREDIBLE HULK way before **BLADE**, but we haven't been satisfied with a lot of scripts. We don't want another **HOWARD THE DUCK** experience. Until we get the right script, we just keep going back to the drawing board."

News that Blade was in the works attracted the attention of writer David Goyer. A USC grad and writer of such films as **DEATH WARRANT** (with Jean-Claude Van Damme), **THE PUPPET MASTERS**, and **THE CROW: CITY OF ANGELS**, Goyer had been a fan of the comic and eagerly pursued the scripting job when he heard that New Line was planning to develop a **BLADE** feature film. Goyer recalled, "I went in with Ernest Dickerson, [director of **TALES FROM THE CRYPT PRESENTS DEMON KNIGHT**]. New Line said they wanted to do a low-budget, six to eight million dollar, down-and-dirty film, and I pitched it as a trilogy of movies

Country-western singer Kris Kristofferson (right) plays Blade's mentor, Abraham Whistler—sort of the "aged gunfighter" role, according to writer David Goyer.



BLADE

MARTIAL ARTS

Kicking vampire-ass, Hong Kong style.

By Dale Kutzera

Wesley Snipes: actor, producer, and, yes, martial artist. Snipes has built a career on characters who hold their power within. The drug lord of *NEW JACK CITY* and the affluent executive of *JUNGLE FEVER* had no need to throw whip-kicks—their power was so present that years of martial arts training seemed redundant. Even in such traditional action roles as law enforcement officers in *RISING SUN* and *PASSENGER 57*, Snipes was judicious in demonstrating his dexterity and strength. There is a moment in *PASSENGER 57*, however, when he kicks back at full extension into a villain's gut, and you realize—this guy knows what he's doing.

"Wesley can do anything," enthused Jeff Ward, *BLADE*'s stunt coordinator. "That's what I like about having a student and brother such as he. His flexibility and agility in the martial arts are enhanced by his dance background. Being behind the camera, I get to see things that I have taught him on film, and have the pleasure of hearing my peers say that he looks good. That dates back to *PASSENGER 57*. We kept holding back and holding back, but with this film we didn't hold back as far as martial arts go. He's shown more than he's ever shown before. I'm very proud of him—to watch dailies and see the moves all look legit, and hear the response of guys I've trained with. After *PASSENGER 57*, where he goes straight-up martial arts, we gave [the audience] a little taste in each film. In *BLADE*, their prayers have answered."

"I've been waiting for this a long time," said Snipes. "I only trained in martial arts for my personal health and recreation. It was a strange feeling that I ended up doing martial arts in *PASSENGER*. It could have just been a bang 'em up shoot 'em up kind



A trained martial artist for his own recreation, Snipes has usually refrained from exploiting his ability on-screen; with *BLADE*, he finally struts his stuff.

of thing." Snipes training, however, allowed him to take a conventional fight scene and "kick some butt and make it funky."

Instrumental in the evolution of Snipes martial arts abilities is Ward. The two have known each other since Ward portrayed a street-fighter opponent in the film *STREETS OF FIRE*. The two worked together on *NEW JACK CITY*, *SUGAR HILL*, and *MONEY TRAIN*. Ward even started to train Snipes in the Filipino style of martial arts Ward prefers. "I have a great respect for Jeff," said Snipes. "He's a great stunt man and, I predict, one of the stronger action-oriented directors to come along, especially for special unit. And he's a hell of a martial artist."

The fact that *BLADE* is set in a decidedly comic-book universe afforded the opportunity to make martial arts a significant component of the film. "From the beginning, we wanted to have an element of the Hong Kong action films," said screenwriter David Goyer. "I love that style of filmmaking, but aside from a few years of Akido, I'm not a huge martial arts aficionado.

Once Wesley got involved, however, we let him go nuts with the stunt coordinators. What's interesting is that because vampires can move faster than humans, and are stronger and more agile than humans, we can get away with a much more baroque style of stunt work than that normal action film. That freed us to do things even more extreme than what the Hong Kong films have."

"Here we get to go all out and do a bit of an homage to all the Asian films," said Snipes, "but that style is based on old westerns that come out of America. So there is a lot of hand-to-hand incorporated, a number of different weapons, wire-work—which is stuff they only do in Hong Kong—and mass spectacle fight scenes. Not just the

camera set and two adversaries going at it, but the camera seeing these two guys and also what is going on in the background. He punches this guy and another person comes from another angle and he hits this guy while the other is falling—controlled chaos."

Ward's first step on the road to "controlled chaos" is break down the various fight sequences in the script and discuss the general parameters with Snipes and director Stephen Norrington. Given the general tone and length of time for a particular fight, Ward will plan out a general choreography, taking into consideration Snipes strengths as a martial artist. "I just feel out what Wesley wants to do," said Ward. "Primarily he was doing all of it himself, and I just want to know how far he wants to go with it, and make sure we're not putting too much on him. I tend to go really big on a lot of things, so I need him to give me little edit. Then he and I break down the intensity of the fight, how it motivates the scene, and then we take it to the director and see what his feelings are. Norrington was hands-on.

He wanted certain weapons to be used and then left it in my hands about how it would flow and where he would start out and end."

The unique quality of the fight sequences was a result of the peculiar ways in which a vampire can be killed. The *BLADE* universe modifies traditional vampire lore by giving a biological basis for each traditional myth. As Goyer explains, "You have to go for the cardiovascular system or the head. You destroy either one—you can kill a vampire. They have an allergy to wood and silver, and they go into anaphylactic shock if they ingest garlic. So we have garlic mace and hypodermic darts with garlic and silver nitrate to use against the vampires. They discover it's the UV element of sunlight that vampires respond to so they can also use sunlamps and their guns have UV entry lights. There is a scene in which Blade interrogates Pearl, a 2000-pound vampire, with a sunlamp. Every time he gives a wrong answer, [Blade] turns on the sun lamp and Pearl starts to smoke a little. We have a lot of fun with that. We tried to have some pseudo-scientific reason all these things would happen. The crosses and reflections and turning to mist made no sense to me. So yes, they cast reflections. There is a scene in which a character says, 'Do you use crosses or stakes?' and Blade says, 'Crosses and holy water don't do dick. You use silver, sunlight, or the stake. Anything else is your ass.'"

To tackle his bloodthirsty foes, Blade—like any comic-hero worth his salt—has an array of custom weapons. "I have a lot of tactical stuff," said Snipes. "Armor-plated vest, silver bullets laced with garlic, silver stakes. A MAC-10 auto, converted. It fires 15 shots in about three seconds. As the bullets trail out the weapon, the gases combust and cause the front part to jackhammer. So you see movement." If that isn't enough,



VAMPIRE FIGHTING

"We didn't want to limit ourselves to one style," said Jeff Ward. "We tried to spice up each scene with something different. Every fight will get people to stand and cheer."



Deacon Frost attacks Blade's mentor Abraham Whistler with a flying kick. "We make the fights really big," said stunt coordinator Jeff Ward.

Blade also comes with a potent sawed-off shotgun and a menacing saber.

Snipes puts all these tools of Blade's trade to work in the initial sequence of the film. Set in a macabre dance club located in a converted meat-packing plant, the sequence involves a hapless man-on-the-make who comes on to the wrong babe. "Raquele is driving him to this secret club," said Goyer. "We get there, and he is all excited; then you realize that everyone in the club is a vampire except for this guy, and they are going to eat him. Blade walks into the club completely unconcerned that he's surrounded by 300 vampires and proceeds to kill every single one of them. The only person that survives is the date, because he's not a vampire."

"We wanted to incorporate hands and feet and expose all the weapons that were identifiable for Blade," said Snipes of the blood-club scene, "and not take it too far into a Japanese mode or a Chinese mode. We weren't going very hard or soft, just to flow and everybody who studies the arts will understand that and may even see something they've studied in terms of the art of sword fighting."

"We didn't want to limit ourselves so that it's just going to look like this one style," said Ward. "The way things are now, it's better to compose it of moves that look nice and work for the fight scene. That let us go in terms of not being so stereotypical in terms of the way it looks. We tried to

Snipes did most of his own stunt work in the film. "Wesley can do anything," Ward enthused.

spice up each sequence with something different. I'm counting on every fight scene to get people to stand up and cheer."

In general, Ward choreographed fights that were longer than requested, so that the scene could be adjusted on the set or in the editing process. On some occasions, production constraints required that once-elaborate sequences be greatly curtailed so they could be filmed more quickly. "I always give more, so we can always cut it back," said Ward. "It's from my training that if the opponent gives you one strike, I make sure that I finish him with six or ten. We would take them really big, and if it doesn't work, we shrink it. The ending battle with Frost was supposed to be really really huge, but because of time we had to chisel it, but all those things are still in our pockets. Other days when we had the time, we would do the whole deal and then cut in the editing room."

If *BLADE* meets the expectations of all those involved, more martial arts would be incorporated into a sequel. Snipes, the canny producer, is well aware of the recent popularity of Asian action films, particularly those of Jackie Chan, with whom he would like to work. "Most Asian films have a very good sense of rhythm," said Snipes. "The fight director, actors, cameraman all know the rhythm, and that is what makes them able to accomplish what they do. Here we don't do that. We bring in one guy from Pacoima, and this guy is from Hong Kong, and this guy from the Bronx, and nobody knows anything about each other's styles. And the cameraman is like, 'Well, just set the camera on some sticks and shoot it.' That has really hurt the action market here—not having that type of energy and spectacle. Couple that with the fact that you don't have many actors who are trained in acting as well as the martial arts and gymnastics and physical skills, and the audience knows. □



that would be almost Wagnerian in scope. I envisioned the trilogy as the STAR WARS of the vampire films. I'm a huge fan of horror films and found a couple of books that listed every vampire film made—hundreds and hundreds of them. Ernest Dickerson and I watched every one we could get our hands on. I had my personal favorite: FRIGHT NIGHT II, some cool stuff there."

Although New Line had envisioned a modest film, perhaps even a spoof on the genre, Goyer lobbied for a completely serious treatment that eliminated much of the supernatural paraphernalia of the genre while recasting the vampires as hideous villains, not the beguilingly doomed but attractive characters prevalent since Anne Rice's *Interview With the Vampire*. "I wanted to treat the character with respect," he explained. "The other thing was that I wanted to do a post-modernist vampire film. I wanted to demystify vampires to a certain extent and approach it from a street [level]. I wrote the initial draft before FROM DUSK TILL DAWN and VAMPIRE IN BROOKLYN and all the other vampire films [took a similar approach]."

Part of the backstory Goyer employed in the script was that vampirism was not a mystical curse, but a legitimate, biological disease. Those infected live for centuries but are still able to procreate, giving birth to baby vampires. When an infected vampire bites a mortal, the disease is passed through the exchange of blood and the human soon "turns" into a vampire. Blade, not quite fitting into either category, grew up wild until the hunger for blood took hold at adolescence. "Our idea is that the thirst manifests itself at puberty," explained Goyer. "Blade had become a runaway and was feeding on animals when Whistler found him. Whistler was going to kill him but eventually found out what he was and wanted to use him, rather selfishly, as a tool. Whistler develops this serum,

BLADE

MARVEL COMICS

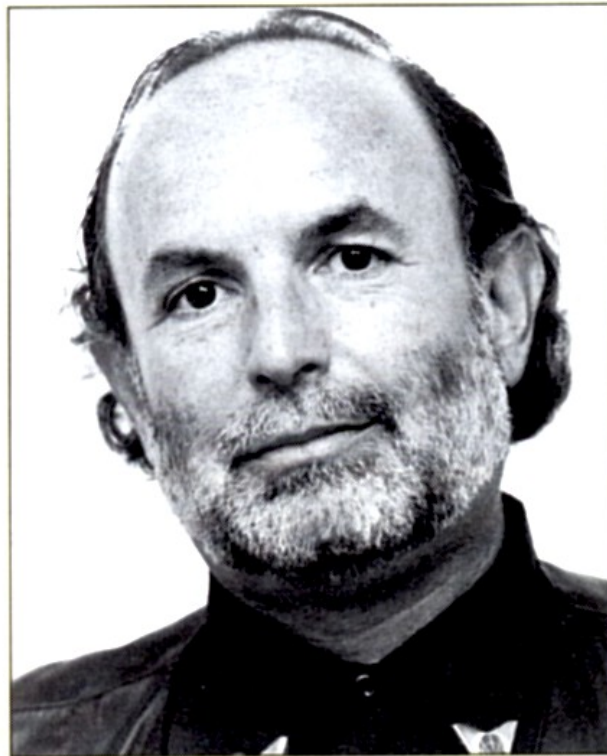
Avi Arad and Stan Lee on shepherding the Marvel Universe to film and TV.

By Frank Garcia and David Evans

As the President and Chief Executive Officer of Marvel Films, Avi Arad shepherds Marvel comics characters to film, television, and animation. Over the years, he and colleague Stan Lee have succeeded with THE X-MEN, SPIDER-MAN, FANTASTIC FOUR and IRON MAN animated series. Now they have BLADE coming to the big screen and NICK FURY, AGENT OF S.H.I.E.L.D. on Fox network.

There are currently seventeen live-action feature projects either in active development or close to production. Some of the live-action titles that Marvel Films hopes to get made include: THE INCREDIBLE HULK with JUMANJI's Jim Johnston directing and Gale Anne Hurd producing, from a script by Michael France and Jonathan Hensleigh; DAREDEVIL, with Chris Columbus directing; THE FANTASTIC FOUR to be produced by Columbus and directed by Carlo Carlei (FLUKE); THE X-MEN with producers Lauren Schuler-Donner and Richard Donner, who will be standing behind THE USUAL SUSPECTS' director Bryan Singer. IRON MAN, DOCTOR STRANGE and a THOR animated feature are also in the works.

The first feature to come out



Avi Arad, president and chief executive officer of Marvel Films.

of all this development is the recently completed BLADE: THE VAMPIRE SLAYER starring Wesley Snipes and written by David Goyer from New Line Cinema. New Line is also keeping BLADE scripter David Goyer busy at work on a screenplay for the CGI-intensive, thriller VENOM, based on Marvel's most vicious, if not most drool intensive, supervillain.

The other man who shares, with Mr. Arad, the title of Co-Executive Producer at Marvel Studios is the legendary Stan Lee. For decades, as an editor, publisher and storyteller extraordinaire, Stan Lee has served as one of the principal architects of the world famous Marvel Universe, a megamythical and mind-bending continuum of imagination populated by gods and aliens, magic and monsters

and some of the most amazing superheros to ever fly off the pages of a comic book. For the past 15 years, Stan has worked in California with Marvel Studios. As he says it, "We're trying to launch our movie and television and animation projects as successfully and artistically as possible."

Basically, Lee seems to be most involved with the various writers, consulting with them on the scripting of the stories behind these projects. "It's basically the script that holds everything up," he declares. "We don't want to make the mistakes that were made some years

ago when we did CAPTAIN AMERICA and THE PUNISHER. Those movie," he said wistfully, "were less than Academy Award caliber." He's quick to add, "We want to make sure that, going in, we have a great story. Because if we have a great story and a great script—all these movies are big budget movies; they're all with the finest studios—we know everything else will fall into line. So, everything depends on having the best possible script."

Fortunately, He's bursting with anticipation over BLADE. "Snipes is sensational," he said. "I think it's going to be a remarkably good movie." Then, he added, with a touch of fatherly pride in his voice, "We finally have a good one."

There are currently five animated series on the air today

with five additional titles also in development such as CAPTAIN AMERICA, THE AVENGERS and NAMOR, THE SUB-MARINER. A GENERATION X movie-of-the-week aired in February 1996 and a sequel is in discussions. BLACK WIDOW is also under discussion as a M.O.W.

Arad credits two major reasons why there's been such a strong interest in recent years by filmmakers and studios in super heroes in general and Marvel heroes in particular. "One, I think we've been somewhat aggressive exporting our characters in film and television. And the reason it's being well received is because today, we've finally possessed the technology that allows us to make interesting super hero movies. Superheroes have such amazing powers that they need a fair amount of CGI effects. Six or seven years ago, these things were not available. We couldn't have created the kind of powers we needed for superheroes in a way that looks credible on the screen and would have been affordable. The word 'affordable' we should use sparingly, because it's still quite expensive to make a fun, believable action picture."

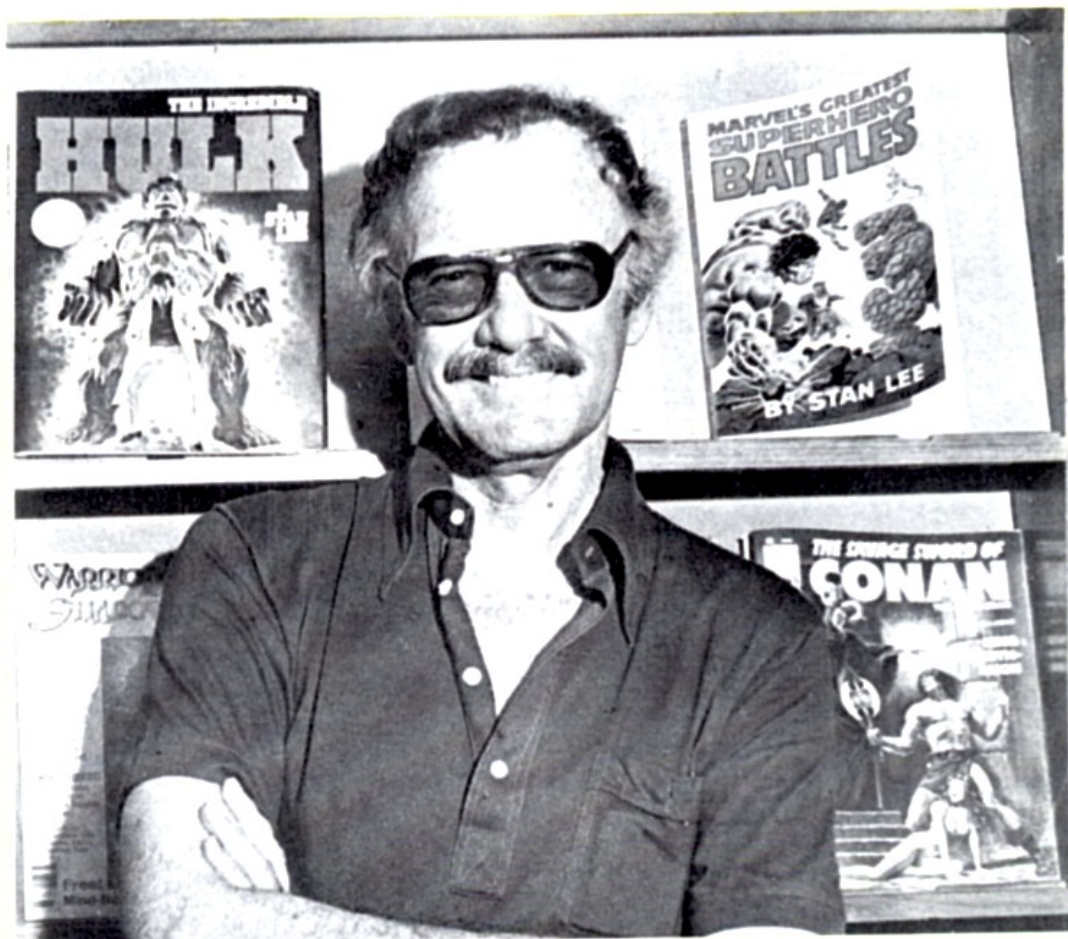
And the second reason why we will continue to see comic heroes arrive at multiplex theaters around the world is that "today's filmmakers have a nostalgic fondness for the Marvel universe," said Arad. "They look at it and say, 'I wish I could do one of these movies. But how do I do that? How do I make the Silver Surfer?' And then you see TERMINATOR 2, and you say, 'Oh yeah! That's how I do the Silver Surfer!'"

From his perspective, Arad reports a definite upswing in the interest for Marvel characters from a varied collection of studios, writers, producers, and directors. Slowly the projects are starting to hit the screen and the airwaves. "Movies like MEN IN BLACK, THE MASK, and of course, BATMAN show filmmakers and theater owners that the comic book content libraries are attractive to audiences. They like to see it. They cheer it. Which of course, makes it easier for us to place these things at various studios." Translation: If a DC Comics character like BATMAN does boffo box office, it's good for any comic book-related film project.

By Arad's definition, the key to successfully adapting comics to live-action is very simple and needs no detailed analysis. It begins with the viewer's ability to suspend his disbelief. "If the characters are interest-

ADAPTING MARVEL COMICS

"We don't want to make the mistakes that were made on CAPTAIN AMERICA and THE PUNISHER," said Lee. "We want to be sure, going in, that we have a great script."



The legendary Stan Lee poses before potential Marvel Film properties. "We're trying to launch our film projects as successfully and artistically as possible."

ing enough and if the movie's absorbing, you don't care what is the logic of it. BACK TO THE FUTURE wasn't real, but it was fun! JURASSIC PARK was able to capture things that you know you cannot do—go to a park and shoot dinosaurs—but it looked like you did. ID4 —there's no aliens attacking us, blowing up the White House. It didn't matter! It was fun to watch. It's the ability to bring it to life so it looks believable."

Regarding the violence that is a part of comic-to-film translations, Arad said that Marvel is very sensitive about how far it is willing to push the envelope, and he described many of their comic book characters as being "anti-violent" "Let's take something like X-Men or Spider-Man. What's very unique about our characters is that they never kill anybody. Then we have our hardcore characters, like BLADE, a half-man/half-vampire. So, when you introduce the vampire world, there's no way to make the movie PG. We have to be very true to entertainment and true to our Universe. To deal with BLADE, you have to go to an R rating."

And finally, what about the most anticipated Marvel feature project of them all—THE AMAZING SPIDER-MAN, which is supposed to be directed by James Cameron (THE TERMINATOR). Unfortunately, the

very enmeshed legal web of disputed film rights and producer credits that's haunted the project for many years has yet to be completely untangled.

"Well, that's the biggest problem," said Lee. "With SPIDER-MAN, that should have been the most perfect situation. Jim Cameron wanted to do it. And, I couldn't think of a better director for that movie in the whole world. Jim even wrote a 55 page treatment, which is one of the best things I've ever read. He took the Spider-Man, we have all known and, without changing him or re-making him in his own image, he kept him just the way he's always been in the comics. But as you're reading the story, you feel you're reading something refreshing and new and exciting, that you've never read before. I think that's a tremendous accomplishment."

"But the problem is," Lee went on to say, "there have been a lot of legal problems, which have nothing to do with Marvel or Jim Cameron or me. Originally, the movie was supposed to be distributed by Carolco. But as you know, they've gone bankrupt. After that, there were a lot of other companies

that claimed they had the rights to distribute the movie and the rights to distribute the video as well. And, as I say, it's a legal hassle that had started years ago when Cannon [Films] bought the rights to Spider-Man before Carolco. Apparently, Cannon had pre-sold all these rights to all these other companies. So, when Carolco took over the distribution, that Cannon had pre-sold [these rights] still seems to linger on. So, all these people were suing Carolco and back again. I'm not a lawyer. I might not be saying this right. But this is sort of the way I understand it. But little by little, all of these legal entanglements are being straightened-out. But because of all of that, they've never been able to start the movie. I'm hoping that pretty soon, we'll be ready to go and that Jim will be available to do it."

MGM is currently claiming ownership over the rights to SPIDER-MAN. Court room litigation is pending. But Arad remains optimistic. "It will happen. Give it time and it will happen. SPIDER-MAN is bigger than all of us, therefore it's going to happen. Too many people want to see it done. Although, there are some legal problems, such an important property will definitely find its way to the screen."

Arad reassured that the protracted delays wouldn't detach Cameron from the project. "It's too wrapped up to do that." □



Above: Udo Kier (ANDY WARHOL'S DRACULA) plays a Vampire Overlord. Right: upstart Deacon Frost intends to overthrow the vampire aristocracy.



a human hemoglobin substitute, which Blade can use [instead of blood]. So since the time he was thirteen, Blade's never succumbed to the thirst. He's never drunk human blood."

In the film, we are introduced to the hero at the peak of his vampire-killing powers. He is gradually becoming tolerant of the blood substitute Whistler has concocted, and a permanent cure becomes imperative. To make matters worse, he must confront the evil Deacon Frost (Dorff). It seems the upstart vampire is trying to assume the Overlord position of head of the House of Arabis—a pretty gutsy move for a

"turned" vampire. This position is typically held by the more aristocratic vampires who are born into the fold. "The pure-bloods look down on the ones that were turned," explained Goyer. "This came to the forefront when [director] Steve [Norrington] got involved. The whole commoner vs. aristocracy conflict is much more prevalent in England than in America. There is the aristocracy, the ruling House of

Arabis with the twelve vampire lords and then the Overlord. Our idea was that one reason you don't see vampires running around on *HARD COPY* is that vampires police themselves. They have their own banking systems and so on, and anytime there are rogue vampires operating—turning people when they are not supposed to be or drawing attention to themselves—the House of Arabis would send some-

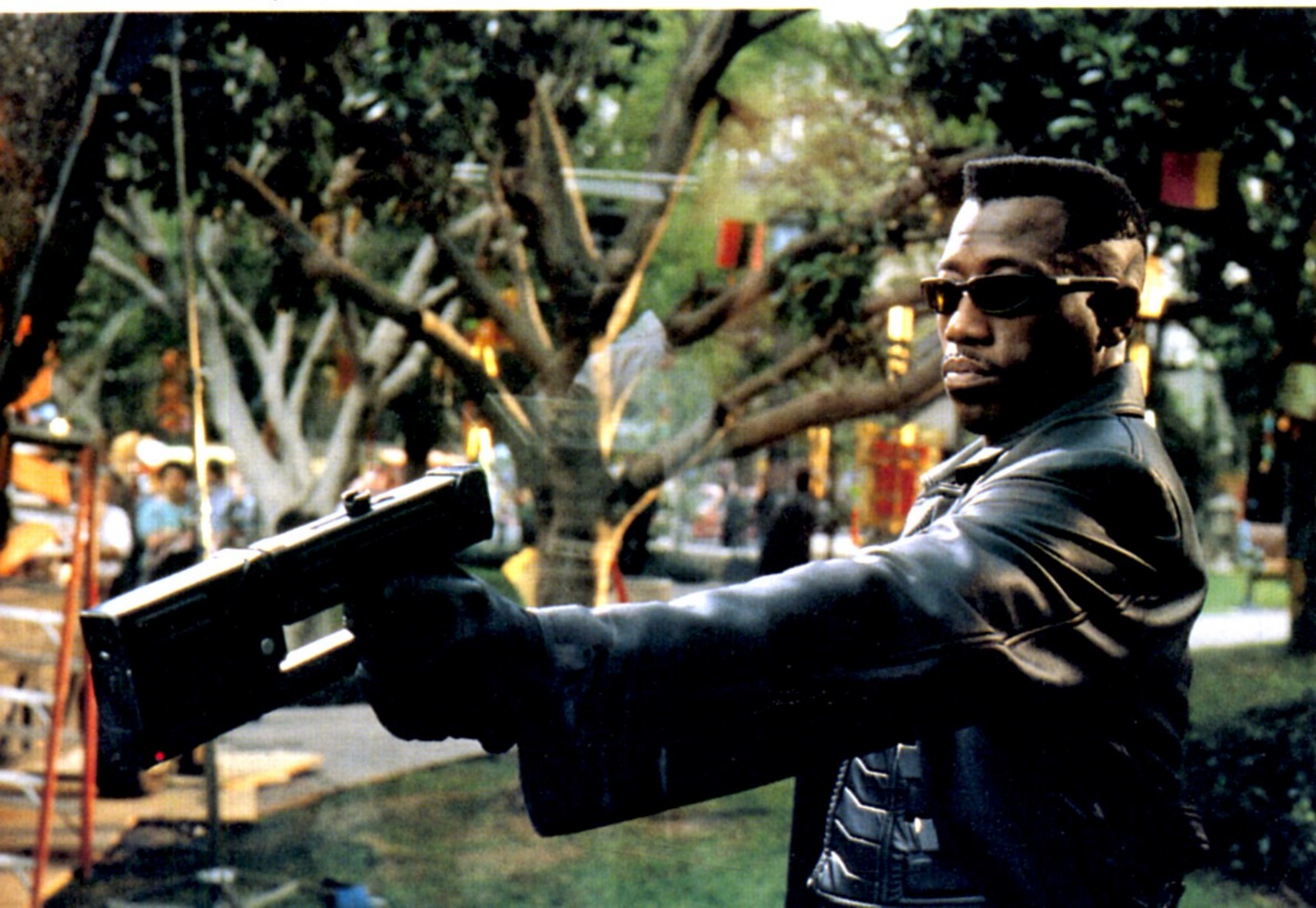
body to wipe them out."

In the comic books, Deacon Frost is an older character, and the part changed considerably in Goyer's screenplay. "Originally we had gone in an Alan Rickman-Shakespearean direction," said Goyer, "and the more we thought about Stephen, the more we thought to play against that. Everything about his performance goes counter to everything you've seen in a vampire before. There is nothing Baroque about him, or elegant, or Shakespearean. He's crass and visceral and all about hunger. He looks like a guy who's spent the last few nights drinking and hasn't showered nor combed his hair and doesn't give a shit. He's completely, 180 degrees from Blade, who has this quiet, dignified presence. They work as opposites to each other."

A new character to the film is Blade's wise mentor, Abraham Whistler, played by the veteran actor and country-western singer Kris Kristofferson. "I thought it would be interesting for Blade to have a mentor—to take a character who is in this time, was nasty, and rubs against Blade. He's the aged gunfighter—the John Wayne character—and the only three people we were thinking about

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Wesley Snipes' Blade displays another of the many weapons in his arsenal against the undead.





After making his debut in *Tomb of Dracula*, Blade went on to star in his own comic book series, which was recently revived in the 1990s (above.) Below: Wesley Snipes plays the filmic incarnation of the comic book character.



BLADE

COMIC ORIGIN

Marv Wolfman on creating the character.

By Dale Kutzera

In the horse race of comic book characters breaking into the movies, Blade was a long-shot. The African-American vampire hunter is a virtual nobody compared to other big screen contenders such as the Fantastic Four, the Hulk, and Spiderman. While the character may be new to most audiences, Blade has been around almost 25 years. Like most comic book creations, the origins of Blade involve a lot of creativity, a little bit of happenstance, and...

Writer-editor Marv Wolfman was well established in the comic book field by the time he envisioned a stake-wielding slayer with an urban attitude in 1972. Having written and edited a number of comics at DC (including several Edgar Rice Burroughs adaptations), he later edited such magazines as *Creepy*, *Eerie*, and *Vampirella* for Warren Publications. The comic book trade was a small community in those days, and it was only a matter of time before he wound up at Marvel as a freelance writer-editor. Marvel was still a small outfit, Stan Lee and Roy Thomas being the key players, and most creative talent was hired on a freelance basis. "I received a call from Roy Thomas, who was editor at that time, and he asked me to come over and edit their horror magazine, but while I was still at Warren he assigned me to *Tomb of Dracula*. It was not necessar-

ily the book I wanted to be assigned to. I had never seen a vampire film, nor was I ever really interested in that type of material. There had been six issues by that time with three different writers. Every writer seemed to do two issues then leave. I was assigned to do issue seven. I read the [Bram Stoker] book and fell in love with it. It was like nothing I imagined it would be, based on the clips of horror films I had seen.

"A couple issues later Blade just came to me: the concept of the black vampire hunter with the teak knives acting like stakes; the whole origin for the character—which they are pretty much replicating for the movie—the attitude, the entire look, which was very unusual. Back then, I tended not to tell the artist what I wanted in absolute detail in terms of costume and look; I never had a full viewpoint on that and felt that was the artist's job to design something. But with Blade, for some reason, I had every detail of how he looked worked out. He was a strange character in that he was one of the very few who came to me completely. Every element of his life and existence came very fast."

Despite the unusual clarity of vision Wolfman had for Blade, the character was intended to be just one of a number of vampire hunters seen in the pages of *Tomb of Dracula*. For a supporting player, however, Blade had a more involved

BIRTH OF BLADE

“His mother was killed as she was giving birth,” explained Wolfman, “so the tainted blood flowed into her baby—a pretty grisly concept for a code-approved comic.”

back story than any other character in the book. “Blade was not considered a super hero,” explained Wolfman. “He was one of the hunters. His origin was that his mother was killed as she was giving birth, so the blood flowed through into the baby—a pretty grisly concept for a code-approved comic. The comic code censored everything, and we were fighting that battle, cause there were no horror comics before us. He was a tougher character, with more of a street attitude. It’s a bit of a cliché, I’m sure, but for the time period it was a down and dirty type of series when no one else was doing that. I’m still amazed that his girlfriend was a stripper. It was a very inner city type of an existence.”

The black sensibility of the character—this was, after all, the age of *SHAFT*—distinguished him from the others, which Wolfman describes as “sort of white bread. They were good characters, but they weren’t anything that challenged you. All comics at that time were clean and nice; the heroes were all heroes. Even Spiderman, whose reputation was to go against all superheroes, was essentially a good guy. With Blade you never knew if he would go against the law. Blade would really throw a monkey wrench into everyone’s plans. He was someone who worked on his own, not with the other vampire hunters. They wouldn’t know how to get in touch with him or find him if they needed him. He would find them. And as I wrote it, the character grew very quickly and became very popular.”

Blade wasn’t the first black superhero—Stan Lee’s Black Panther holds that title—but the stake wielding hunter was one of the first to bring the new black urban sensibility to comic pages. “I had tried while at DC

to introduce the first black superhero many years before and we were stopped at that time,” continued Wolfman, “but the idea of doing a black hero when no one else was doing it was in my mind for a long time even before the Shaft-type stuff came in. Marvel didn’t have that problem, and we were given carte blanche to do what we wanted. It wasn’t a matter of consciously being relevant. It was, why not? I lived in New York City, and every ethnic type was there. When I read *Dracula* and looked at the vampire films, there seemed to be no blacks in any of these and that always surprised me. So we did it.”

Wolfman also notes that the predominantly Caucasian appearance of superheroes in the ’70s reflected the largely white cadre of writers and artists who created them. “Up until the last 15 years there were few blacks in the comics industry. So unless someone had a desire to do it, it wouldn’t have gotten done. It wasn’t in people’s thoughts. We were young kids coming in and were more plugged in to what was going on.”

The Tomb of Dracula, a troubled book when Wolfman took it over, became the longest running horror comic, running 70 issues over eight years. Wolfman used the character of Blade conservatively throughout the series. “He took off quickly, but I have a tendency not to mill the character, so I didn’t run him in every story. He would vanish every couple months, then come back. He developed slowly but became very popular.”

When Wolfman began editing the *Vampire Tails* book, he created a special Blade series for that title. Blade also appeared in other books every so often, but generally stuck with *Tomb of Dracula*. Marvel’s horror comics were handled differently from their superhero



Blade faces off with his old foe, Count Dracula, in the revived comic book series of the '90s.

counterparts and set in a completely different universe—which may be why fans of Spiderman or Fantastic Four are unfamiliar with the character. Wolfman, who became Editor in Chief at Marvel, eventually left the company and returned to DC. The *Tomb of Dracula* book died a few months after he left. “Frankly, I didn’t think the people that followed me had the slightest concept of what the book was about. We made it last longer than other books. We received all sorts of awards for the book. I was very happy with it and felt it was the best project I had worked on.”

Blade continued to appear intermittently until the horror craze ended in the early '80s. Then the character vanished for several years. “They asked me to do a four-issue *Dracula* series five years ago, and I brought Blade back in that one,” said Wolfman. “The approach was that Blade had gone through all

this stuff and of all the characters in the original book, he was the one that had gone insane. I had him in an insane asylum, based on what happened. I put him over the edge, but the series was not very good for a number of reasons.”

As Blade’s presence in comic page ebbed, Hollywood’s interest grew. In the late '80s New World Pictures, which owned Marvel at the time, commissioned a Blade script from the writing team of Bill Rabkin and Lee Goldberg (now producers of *DIAGNOSIS MURDER*). The story was deliberately modeled on the western film’s of Sergio Leone, right down to a teaser reminiscent of the opening of *ONCE UPON A TIME IN THE WEST*. “It was set in a small town next to a decaying, the-future-is-yours sub-

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BLADE

MAKE-UP FX

Cannom Creations' over-the-top, obese vampire.

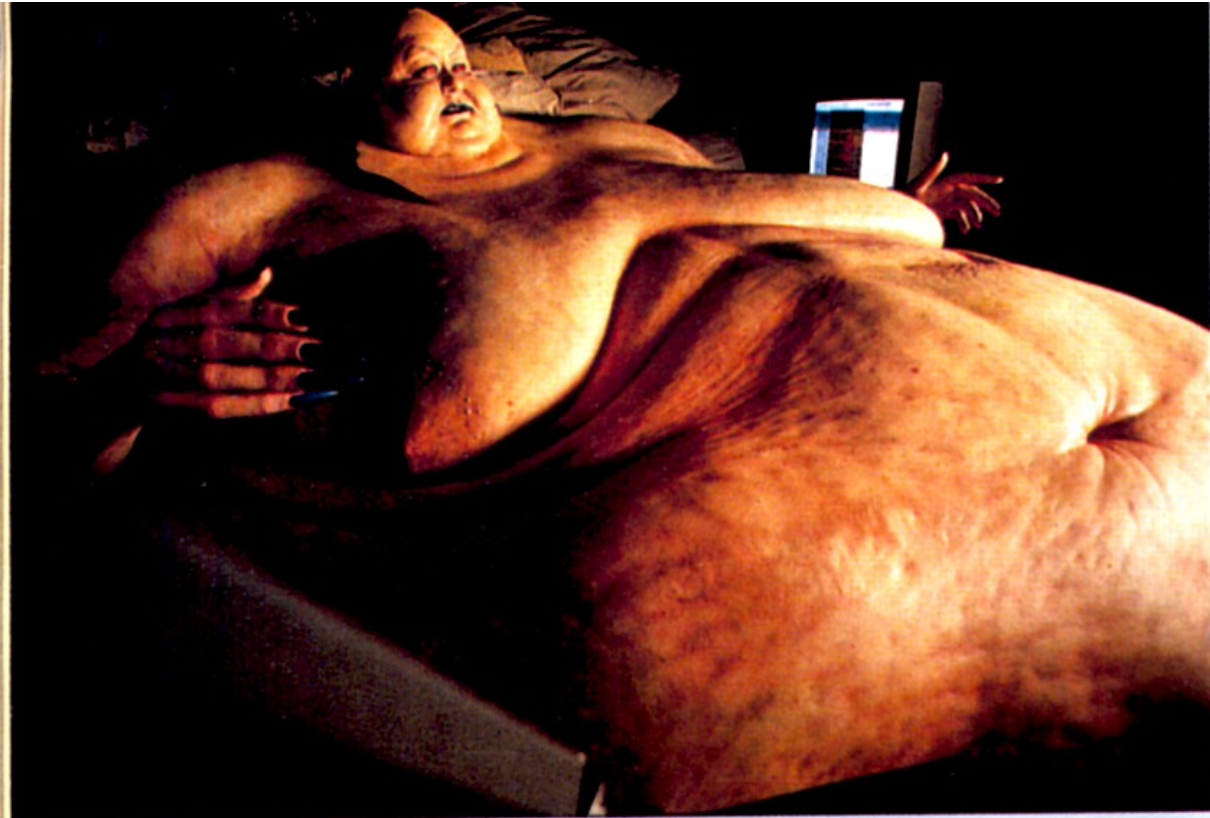
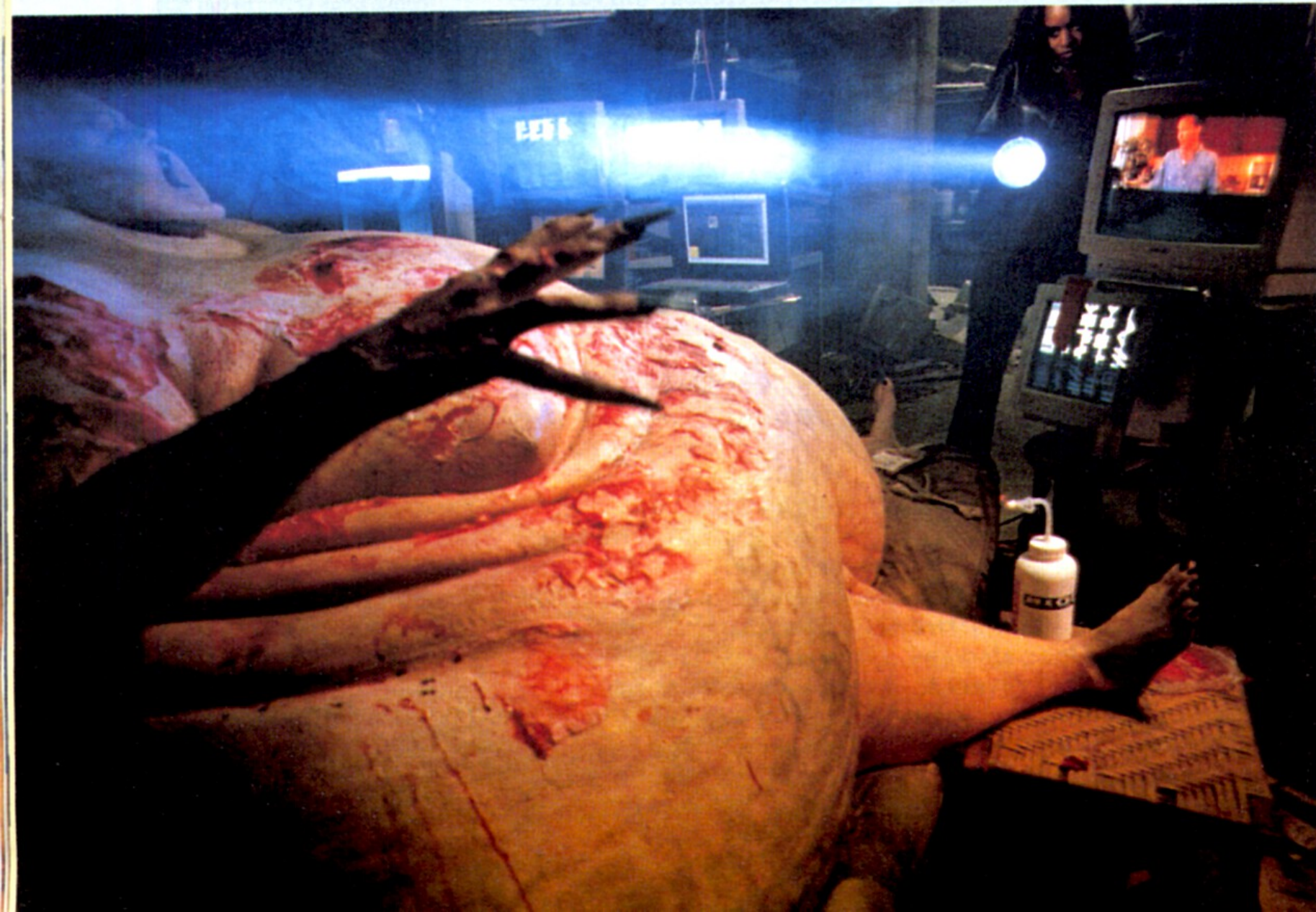
In **BLADE**, the show-stopper character is Pearl, a gigantic 2,000-pound vampire librarian who provides our hero (Wesley Snipes) with crucial information. "He's enormous, gigantic, androgynous, pale, and sickly," described Miles Teves, art director of Greg Cannom Creations Inc. "I started off doing a series of sketches, getting larger and larger. Finally, the director [Steven Norrington] scanned one sketch, then stretched it horizontally, doubling its width. He wanted it to look like an enormous dollop of melting ice cream. Pearl's so huge—his skin is

stretched tight over waddles and layers of cellulite, dipping like cottage-cheese thighs. We used the tabloids as a reference. *The National Enquirer* always has clips of people with weight problems."

The process began with a clay maquette Teves sculpted from the approved design renderings. "I did a rough maquette," Teves explained, "then Roland Blacflour took a mold and created a resin positive. We cut this positive into cross sections and then blew them up [to the desired size]. We prepared wood oval cross-sections, and in between made a skin of hard resin foam. Over that, I sculpted the [full-size] thing out of water-base clay. It weighed a lot. We actually made it on a flat bed trailer in order to take it down the street to the fiberglass molding shop. We were afraid it would blow out the tires."

After two weeks of sculpting, a fiberglass mold was made of the monstrous clay original; then a smaller core-mold was prepared. Silicon was poured into the gap between the inner and outer molds, and this became the "skin" of Pearl. "It was silicon with a polyfoam backing laid over a fiberglass understructure," said Teves. "The legs and arms from the elbows down were sculpted separately. They joined the body where the elbow would be." The completed silicone body was returned to the Cannom studios where Tim Larson was

Top: Pearl, a 2,000-pound vampire librarian, played by Eric Edwards beneath makeup designed and executed by Greg Cannom Creations. Middle: Cannom Creations art director Miles Teves touches up the full-sized sculpt of the Pearl makeup. Below: Dr. Jansen (Wright) helps Blade interrogate Pearl with the aid of a UV light that simulates the effect of the sun on vampires.





The first stage concept drawing by Miles Teves for the 2,000-pound vampire Pearl.

assigned the task of giving the beast an appropriately translucent flesh tone. Larson had painted sample section of silicone skin for approval by the director, and went on to paint a silicone cast of the maquette Teves had sculpted. "I was home sick one day, and they needed skin samples to test the lighting," said Larson. "I did those just on some discs of silicone. They loved them, and I proceeded to do the maquette. They approved it, and then I forged ahead with the big dog."

Larson constructed a makeshift paint booth around the "big dog" during the four days he would work on it. "It was primarily all air brush work," said Larson. "I use an air-curing silicone caulking, a specific brand that I pigmented with universal tinting colors. Then I reduced the caulking with a citrus-based solvent to an air-brushable medium. I like it to be as watery as Kool-Aid."

To achieve the desired translucent effect, Larson built up numerous coats of pigment, each separated by a layer of clear silicone. "Painting with silicone is inherently translucent, and then I sandwiched between each color a clear coat of silicone, which kind

of immersed the color and made it more intrinsic. I started out with reds, browns, and pinks, and broke up the surface of the skin with little curlicues and figure eights. Then I built in the contours with washes of yellow and blue—colors you would not think of, but they create the illusion of shadows under the skin. I looked at some naked mole rats for reference."

In the final layers of pigment, Larson carefully airbrushed blue veins across the surface of the skin. "I mostly was winging it," he said. "I laid out some veins on the small maquette, and Greg [Cannom] himself gave me a few pointers and his opinion. Then I just eye-balled them. The shape of the forks and patterns had to be fairly realistic. Painting this was a dream project in a way, because everyone wants to paint veins and translucent skin. I'd say I mixed down seven colors with variations. There were eight to ten layers of different things."

The character of Pearl was filmed over several days and involved the enormous body shell, a puppeteer moving the rod-controlled legs, two small actors manipulating each arm, technicians

controlling an enormous air bladder to simulate breathing, and actor Eric Edwards who (beneath a layer of foam latex) provided the voice. Said Teves, "There wasn't much room inside for the guys and their video monitor. Each had a little monitor to see what the hands were doing and what Eric was doing."

To embellish Edward's already round face, Teves sculpted enormous jowls three and four inches thick. The single appliance covered most of the actor's face, and the seam where the facial make-up met the body was hidden in a convenient crease of fat. The facial make-up was applied on the set by artist Steve Prowdy.

Pearl's gruesome demise from prolonged exposure to an ultra violet "gun" was achieved through smoke tubes and burned-skin make-up improvised on the set. Although a fully sculpted false head was made, the director preferred a less drastic burned effect achieved by painting Edward's face in various shades of red, and supplementing the existing latex appliance with strips of dried Elmer's glue, painted black, to simulate crispy flesh.

Dale Kutzera

for Whistler were Patrick Macgoohan, Jon Voight, and Kris Kristofferson. I'm really happy with Kris. I loved him in LONE STAR."

When Goyer's screenplay met with approval from New Line and Marvel, it was sent to Wesley Snipes. No other actor was seriously considered, and Snipes had already committed to play the first African American comic-hero, the Black Panther. "Marvel already had me in mind to do a comic book hero as a movie," said Snipes. "I'm scheduled to do the Black Panther, and the script we have is tight, but wasn't ready yet. The timing was right for BLADE. [Marvel] brought it to my company Amen Ra, and then we went to New Line and discussed doing the project there. We could do anything with this type of project—very open parameters. Plus, I had played lot of cops and the good-guy stuff, and wanted to do something more edgy, with more overtones of the whole NEW JACK CITY type of image. This was perfect, because he's a good guy who's a bad guy, and a bad guy who's really a good guy, and a guy who's misunderstood, with this kind of biochemical imbalance."

BLADE is Amen Ra's first production and Snipes' first project as co-producer. The project allowed him to bring a strong overall perspective and vision to the film, and ensure that the finished project will be as close to the original intention as possible. "We're trying to create something that appeals across markets and across genres," said Snipes. "I like [producing] a lot more than just being an actor for hire, because I get up there and do all the work and then someone else—who knows less of what I was doing—puts it together, usually in a way that doesn't give credence to what it was we were trying to do. We review any script that comes to me and add a little stuff here and there. When it comes to the producer side of it, structure is first and foremost to me. Dialogue can be tweaked on the set, or in rehearsal with the other actors.

BLADE

VAMPIRE HUNTER SIDEKICK

N'bushe Wright on battling the blood disease.

The role of Hematologist Karen Jansen, played by 27-year-old N'bushe Wright (DEAD PRESIDENTS), is central to the conceit in *Blade* that vampirism is a blood disease. As the demi-vampire Blade hunts down his immortal enemies, he consumes a blood-substitute concocted by his mentor Abraham Whistler (Kris Kristofferson). Whistler searches for a cure for the disease before Blade develops a tolerance for the blood-substitute and is forced to pursue more traditional food sources—i.e., warm-blooded mortals.

"At the lab where I work, we're doing tests when this vampire runs into my hospital all burned up," explained Wright. "He dies, and we're about to close up when he jumps off the table. Then here comes Blade flying behind. I'm terrified and the vampire jumps on top of me and takes a hefty bite out of my neck. Blade has a choice to leave me on the ground or to whisk me up and take me off and try to cure me."

This pivotal decision gave Snipes cause for concern. "Adding a woman into the piece suggested some problems," said Snipes. "We don't want to make Blade seem like he's a super-hero playboy—someone who picks up chicks on the side while he's biting other people on the neck. But at the same time, I didn't want him to be completely callous and cold like T2, almost emotionless. That can work, but it's kind of redundant. So why does he take her along? He has lines that say there is no room for prisoners, and he's not out to save humans in that context. He saves them vicariously out of his revenge against the vampires who killed his mother and made him what he is. So why does he take this girl—especially one who has been bitten? He knows she will turn later on,



N'bushe Wright plays hematologist Karen Jansen, who (like Dr Julia Hoffman in *DARK SHADOWS*) tries to cure Blade of his vampire affliction.

and he would normally kill her. We had to structure it so in the beginning he's cold and callous and unfeeling. He could take her or leave her, but then as it progresses he becomes more concerned about her, more sensitive and protective of her. You see at times when the human side of him has feelings and attractions for her."

The romantic attractions between Blade and Dr. Jansen are never overt. "We never go there," said Wright. "It's subtle and underlying. He's very cold and distant, and I'm a doctor—I see a potential patient or someone who needs help. I'm there trying to find a cure for Blade as well as myself, cause I'm starting to turn, and they might kill me. Basically, we're trying to beat the clock by chasing vampires and finding cures."

"They flirt, but we never wanted them to get sexual," said Goyer. "Our idea was that Blade wouldn't allow himself to do that, 'cause in his mind he's not human and that is a pleasure he is denying himself."

While Blade may be cold and distant on screen, Wright found Snipes the actor and first-time pro-

ducer to be active and engaging off screen. "I had seen him in all these action movies but had no idea how brilliant he was. His perspective is so broad—from the producing to the acting and physical stuff, the kung fu and karate. From an actor's perspective, it was a pleasure to learn so much about the medium of acting on this big, \$50-million-movie scale. I was like a babe, and he made it wonderful, comfortable, and taught me so much about the camera. I had to learn about the stunts in relations to what the camera sees."

Among Snipes mandates were for Wright to view videotaped dailies of herself. "I don't like to see myself during my work. I don't want to be judging myself, but Wesley said, 'Uh-uh, honey, you're gonna have to see your work.' This was very traumatic, but that is how he wanted it to be done. He wanted us to watch our work, examining and reexamining the character for ourselves. That was interesting and new, and then I wanted to see more."

Wright may play a modern, well-educated woman, but the age-

old position women hold in male action-stories was difficult to escape. She resisted any attempt to turn Dr. Jansen into a damsel in distress. "My character was pretty tough," said Wright. "I tried to add an urban perspective: she had done research on her own, in her own community. It was important to me that she had her own weight, and was not completely dependent on Blade. Wesley wanted me dependent upon him. Sometimes we got into fights about that, but I'm not a pussy. I know she has to have a certain vulnerability, but a woman in the '90s, in New York—it was important to show a side of the character where she was afraid but not a wimp."

Often when Wright stood her ground, two versions of the given scene were filmed, one in which Wright played a needful victim, and another interpretation that convey more strength and inner resolve. This way the ultimate tone of her performance could be tailored in the editing process. "[Stephen] Norrington had his vision and was first to say, 'N'bushe, I'm not sure how they see you, but I'm hoping it won't be as this weak, whimpering chick who has to always be saved. I want you to be very independent.'"

It is her character's selflessness that ultimately saves Blade: in the climax, she offers the contents of her jugular to revive the weakened hero. The sexual overtones are implicit when you realize that Blade has never bitten a human neck until that moment. "The most enjoyable scene for me was when Wesley sucked the blood out of my neck. There are so many scenes of falling into holes and grabbing pieces of bones from bodies and beating the shit out of guys, that being in a scene with him sucking the blood out of my neck was fun. I loved it."

Dale Kutzera

SEMI-VAMPIRE EXISTENCE

“The character in the comic is living more a dual life,” said Snipes. “I’m not approaching it that way. I’m playing a guy who accepts that he is different; he keeps his distance.”

Sometimes an actor will say something different than it is in script, because it rolls off the tongue better. I don’t worry too much about the spoken words of a script once we go into production. It’s the structure that I’m worried about.”

“The script is remarkably similar to the first draft,” said Goyer. “There have been various permutations, but it is quite close. Wesley barely changed anything. From the very first draft he wanted to be Blade. That was a real treat. When I went over to Wesley’s house to go over the script, he had a Shaft tape in the VCR. He wanted that kind of hipness to the character. As in the comics, Blade is filled with self loathing. He only operates on hate for the people who made him, and for what he is. He’s a character who uses his anger as a way to motivate himself. If you took away that anger, what would he do with himself? It’s arguable he’ll have to deal with that question at the end of this movie. He’s not human, but not vampire. Neither will accept him so he’s caught between these two worlds”

“I think the character in the comic book is living more a dual-life,” said Snipes. “He has romance. You see him out of costume, interacting with humans on a very normal level. I’m not approaching it that way. I’m playing a guy that accepts that he’s different. He keeps a distance from humans as much as he can, because he’s an anomaly. At the same time he’s sensitive to and susceptible to their emotional range. I’m approaching this like a Shakespeare play. This has the same kind of poetic way of speaking which in everyday life doesn’t work, but in that world it does. It’s

a period piece. It’s a different way of talking, a different way of walking to sell the whole reality. Blade has a poetic way of speaking, sometimes in long sentences, sometimes just a word, but the mannerisms have a very mythic, epic quality to them.

“There is a scene where Blade needs to get his serum from an apothecary who also doubles as his fence. After Blade kills the vampires, he keeps whatever jewelry or gold is left—he has to finance the revolution somehow. And he goes to this guy, and they have a conversation about getting new serum. Blade is developing an immunity to the serum and Blade says, ‘Alternatives?’ Now to say alternatives in this context is poetic in a sense, because it’s a rich work that says a whole lot really quickly. He might have said, ‘What can we do?’ That’s a familiar response. But to say ‘alternatives’ in his world is absolutely right to the point. And the choice of the word gives it more richness.”

Once Wesley Snipes signed on board, the modest six to nine-million dollar movie turned into a major, \$50-million event film. Director Ernest Dickerson fell out of the production, and other



Blade displays a nifty tattoo as he collars Deacon Frost, the vampire whose attack on Blade’s pregnant mother resulted in the vampire hunter’s condition.

directors were briefly involved, including David Fincher and Sam Raimi. New Line and Amen Ra ultimately found a director on whom all could agree in Stephen Norrington. BLADE is Norrington’s second feature film, after DEATH MACHINE (1994). A sculptor and special effects artists on YOUNG SHERLOCK HOLMES, ALIEN (for which he shared an Academy Award) and ALIEN 3, Norrington follows in the footsteps of David Fincher (SEVEN), Michael Bay (THE ROCK), and most recently Simon West (CON AIR)—all directors who have made the transition from commercial and music video work to feature films.

In Norrington, Snipes found a director who could balance the action and character elements of the story. “Finding a guy who is balanced is very difficult, but Steve Norrington turned out to be perfect. He has an imagination that’s all over

Star and producer Wesley Snipes confers on the set with director Stephen Norrington.



he place. He’s frantic and frenetic. His other movie, DEATH MACHINE, had this monster who was programmed to attack and kill whatever has been targeted, like a gigantic steal Tyrannosaurus Rex. And the things he did with it were great. He even put the thing into a fight with a human and the machine moved martial arts style. I thought, ‘I like this guy.’”

For Goyer, BLADE represents more than a new “take” on the vampire genre. Beneath the macabre atmosphere and action set-pieces, is a relevant morality tale about prejudice. “I pitched BLADE as a race movie: vampires against humans. Deacon is overtly a racist. He believes vampires are the master race and believes a final solution must be enacted on the human race. So when he calls Blade a race-traitor, he’s speaking literally, but it is couched in this snarly, crass street attitude. Deacon has his own issue, because he was turned, not a pure blood. He’s always lusted after the power they have. They remind him that he is not a pure blood, which he desperately wishes he could be. That’s his Achilles heal. There is a Zen saying: if you’re on the road to enlightenment you have to kill your father, kill your mother, and kill your brothers. We jokingly said that is what Blade will have to do in order to reach enlightenment. His enlightenment is the acceptance of his human half by the end of the film.” □

NICK FURY

The Marvel comic book character comes

By Frank Garcia

Nick Fury and his faithful S.H.I.E.L.D. commandos are blasting and jumping their way out of the four-color pages of the comic books and into a premiere Fox TV movie this month. Personifying this brash, cigar-chomping Nick Fury is a familiar face from one of the world's most popular TV shows: BAYWATCH's David Hasselhoff.

Co-creators Stan Lee and legendary artist Jack Kirby invented Sgt. Fury and His Howling Commandos for Marvel Comics in 1963 as a band of World War II soldiers. Later, the characters were updated as futuristic, high-tech international spy and espionage agents of S.H.I.E.L.D. (Supreme Headquarters International Espionage Law-enforcement Division) in 1965. And it is this incarnation of the intrepid heroes that we'll see in the film. Serving as executive producers on the film are Stan Lee himself, Marvel Films president and CEO Avi Arad, Tarquin Gotch and Bob Lemchen. David Roessell is the producer, with Matt Edelman as associate producer.

"David Goyer wrote a great script!" exclaimed Stan Lee. "I thought he very much captured the flavor of Nick Fury. When you're writing about a main character, the most important thing is to make that character believable, empathetic, and interesting. And I think David did all of that. He wrote [Nick Fury] for the movie the way I had always tried to write him in the comic book." (Goyer has also adapted another Marvel character for New Line Cinema: BLADE: THE VAMPIRE SLAYER.)

Lee's enthusiasm has to do with the fact that Nick Fury is a physically and emotionally vulnerable hero. And it is for these reasons that, out of a large library of characters, FURY was chosen for television. "Actually, Nick Fury and S.H.I.E.L.D. is the most realistic," noted Lee. "Nobody has any super powers. So, it might work a little bit better as a television movie and perhaps later as a television series. It doesn't need the many fantastic special effects that you might need if you were doing Thor, the God of Thunder, for example. It's a little bit more 'do-able' for television."

With David Hasselhoff as Nick Fury, bringing a gallery of heroes and villains to



Nick Fury, the comic book character created by Stan Lee and Jack Kirby, comes to Fox network this month in a two-hour made-for-television movie that could launch a series.

life are Lisa Rinna as Nick's old girlfriend and S.H.I.E.L.D. agent, Val; Canadian actor Garry Chalk as the Nick's loyal sidekick, Tim "Dum Dum" Dugan; Britisher Neil Roberts as the youthful and inexperienced S.H.I.E.L.D. agent Pierce; Ron Canada as the S.H.I.E.L.D. scientist Gabe. Actors Tracy Waterhouse and Adrian Hughes also round out the cast as S.H.I.E.L.D. agents Kate Neville and Clay Quartermain. Plus, keep your eyes peeled for S.H.I.E.L.D.'s communications officer at HQ. In a very special appearance, it's Stan Lee himself who dons a S.H.I.E.L.D. uniform and reports for duty in a scene with Dugan. "I have a few lines and I say, 'Something's wrong! Fury is missing!' and [Dugan] comes over and he looks at the screen with me and we exchange a few words," said Lee. "I've forgotten what they are now. I even added an extra line that wasn't written. I ad-libbed! I padded my role! I loved it! I am now Stan Lee, agent of S.H.I.E.L.D.!" (Lending a cameo in his comic book adaptations is not new for Lee, who often narrated various Marvel animated shows. He also appeared as a jury foreman in the 1989

TRIAL OF THE INCREDIBLE HULK telefilm.)

In David Goyer's script, Nick Fury is stunned to discover that the world is once again threatened by HYDRA, a fantastic terrorist organization now run by Andrea Von Strucker (Sandra Hess), also known as Viper. Her father, the Baron, who once led the group, was killed many years ago by Nick Fury, and her motives are pure revenge. After the killing of a S.H.I.E.L.D. agent, Fury is brought out of retirement to help battle HYDRA once again. This time, HYDRA is holding Manhattan hostage with a lethal biological virus that was developed by the Nazis during World War II.

Prominent in the film are high-tech assault helicopters, combat rifles and giant screens transmitting tactical schematics. Familiar comics inventions such as the "Life Model Decoys" and S.H.I.E.L.D.'s floating-in-the-skies helicarrier headquarters are faithfully rendered as well. The HQ will be realized on film by a combination of models and CGI wizardry. In one of the most exciting sequences, we'll witness Nick Fury in a helicopter tangling with a deadly airborne missile.

Steering all the action, which was filmed entirely in Vancouver, British Columbia, is Australian director Rod Hardy, who filmed the recent four-hour adaptation of Jules Verne's 20,000 LEAGUES UNDER THE SEA mini-series with Michael Caine. He said that the key to successfully translating comics to a live-action film is not to focus on the action and stunts but to bring, with a little help from actors, realism and dimension to the characters. "You have to get the actors who truly believe," explained Hardy. Otherwise, according to the director, "it becomes so over-the-top, so big it's not believable. The actors are just making it 'big.' So we spend time rehearsing and really try to find a place for everyone to fit into the story, so the performance comes from a real place. And then you start to add the layers on top of that, rather than going straight to the comic book and having no believability."

As David Hasselhoff explained, the days spent in rehearsal before the cameras rolled were crucial for the actors. "We sat around a table and got into improvisation techniques about what happened to Val and Nick:

RY

to television.

Why's there tension there? Why is Nick sarcastic? What happened to him in his past?

"Dugan [actor Garry Chalk] and I just sat down and said, 'We've been best friends for a long time...' We just started to take a walk and I said, 'You know, if you had not had that señorita on your knee, you wouldn't have lost that tooth.'

"Well, why did you have to punch me out that night?"

"I said, 'Well, I was saving your life! If you hadn't shown me that Foreign Legion air magazine, we wouldn't have spent 19 months in the Philippines!'

"He said, 'How was I supposed to know you were going to get dysentery?'

"So we just played off each other and created this background: who Clay [Quartermain] is to us, why Clay was important, and why that made Nick come out of retirement. And why Val moved with Clay as opposed to Nick. In the beginning it's established that Val slept with Clay. Clay was Nick and Dugan's best friend. We established a relationship in the past. So when we came to the set, we weren't really concerned about the lines [of dialogue]; we were more concerned about what goes on behind the lines. We created that depth and life to all the scenes."

Grateful for the rehearsals, Lisa Rinna (MELROSE PLACE) said she gained invaluable insights to her character. "I think that's the reason why this is working," she said. "Rather than just coming on and playing these parts, we really spent time creating relationships. By doing that, I found the character Valin. I have a good idea what she's about and where she came from—what parts of *me* I could use to play her."

Stan Lee echoes the actors' sentiments. "That's one of the things that makes Rod Hardy such a good director. That's what makes any good movie, when the actors really get into the role because they know who they're supposed to be."

Stan Lee concluded, "It's true to the comic book. They made it very intelligent. It's very accessible for people who've never read the comic book. You don't have to read the comic to understand or appreciate it. I think those who are familiar with the comic book will enjoy it tremendously. I don't feel let down in anyway. This really is Nick Fury as he should be. I just hope that other people like it as much as I like it." □



Above: David Hasselhoff plays agent Nick Fury, with Lisa Rinna (r) as Valin and Sandra Hess (l) as Andrea Von Strucker, alias the Viper. Below: Rod Hardy, Hasselhoff and Stellina Rusich as Interpol agent Gale Runcitr.



CAPED FEAR

What scares comic book artists? The thought of Hollywood adapting their work.

by David Evans

The BATMAN movies have told Hollywood: that's how you make a comic book movie," declared Rob Schrab, 27, creator of comic book sensation *Scud: The Disposable Assassin* (Fireman Press). "The story's got to be moronic. The acting's got to be campy and silly and bad. And the lines have got to be retarded." Schrab goes on to mention his distress and disappointment over the cinematic versions of *Judge Dredd*, *Tank Girl*, and *Barb Wire*. In short, his point is this: the film industry has an abysmal track record for transforming comic books into live-action movies.

Mr. Schrab is far from alone in this opinion. This feeling of deep anxiety is also felt by other comic book artists across the publishing industry. Their fear is that if they sell the film rights

of their comic book off to a Hollywood producer, it will get turned into a "stupid movie." So, the broad questions looming behind their fear is this: Why does the film industry crank out such dreadful comic book movies? And, can anything be done about it?

To fully grasp this, you've got to understand that Hollywood in recent times has gone completely wild for comic books. With the runaway success of the BATMAN franchise, producers and studios are on a voracious rampage in an attempt to find the next ultra-lucrative superhero saga. Last summer saw the event flicks BATMAN & ROBIN and MEN IN BLACK (based Lowell Cunningham's cult sci-fi comic

book) roar across the screen, followed by SPAWN and the dubious STEEL.

In addition, Tinseltown is gearing-up for a blitzkrieg of comic book adaptations, including a sure to be super-hyped SUPERMAN LIVES (directed by Tim Burton and starring Nicholas Cage). Marvel Studios, not to be outdone, hopes to follow up BLADE with adaptations of *Spider-Man*, *Fantastic Four* and more off-beat comics like *Mort: The Dead Teenager*. There's also buzz of future productions of Rob Liefeld's *Avengelyne*, Neil Gaiman's *The Sandman* and *Mr. Hero*, Mickey Spillane's *Mike Danger*, Gene Roddenberry's *Xander*, not to mention *The Green Hornet*, *Sgt. Rock* and

The Tick. But remember, those are just the highlights.

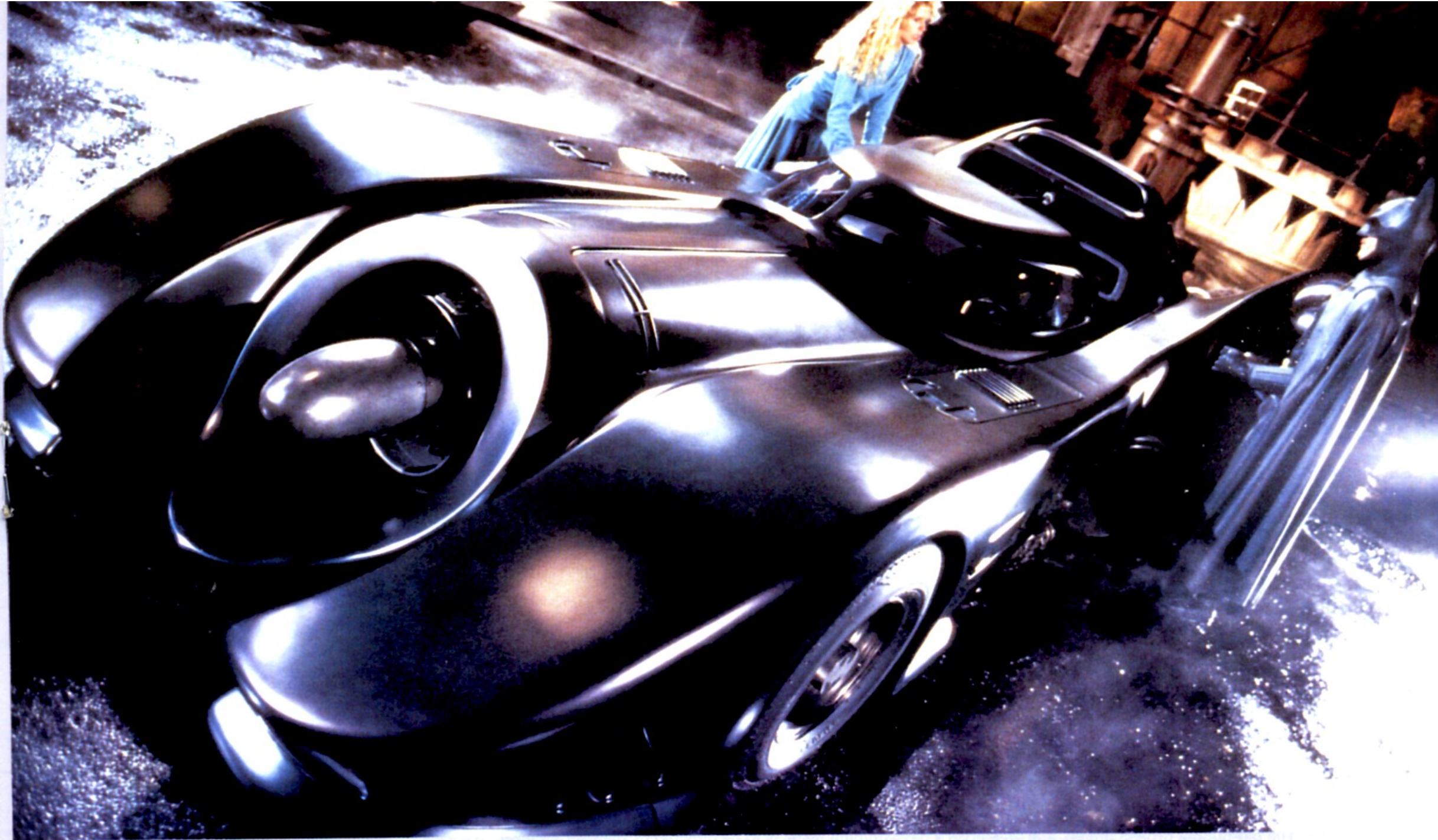
"I think the thing that pushed it over the top was THE CROW," said Kurt Busiek writer of *Astro City* (Homage), "because it proved that a comic did not have to be a financial success for the movie to make a lot of money. So all of a sudden, it wasn't Hollywood looking at whatever the top selling comic book was. Suddenly, it was Hollywood looking at *Men In Black*, which was not a successful comic book [in terms of copies sold]." Consequently, innumerable comic book artists across the country, who own their own comic property, have been approached at least once by would be producers with a plea to purchase film rights.

So intense is the rush to find the next hot property that sometimes producers have offered to buy without ever having read or even seen the comic themselves. Evan Dorkin (Slave Labor Graphics) tells the story of a representative from a company who called him up wanting to turn his series, *Milk & Cheese* (a tale about two hilarious but brutal, drunken dairy products), into a children's Saturday morning cartoon show.

Plots and characters based on pre-existing comic books have much to offer the prospective film company. In many cases, they already have name recognition and a small but loyal following. And, by their very nature, comics already have a ready made script and story board combined. Moreover comic books carry a kind of underground authenticity with the public, especially young adults, that corporate dominated Hollywood often has trouble manufacturing on its own.

Though not based on a specific comic book, Sam Raimi's DARKMAN (starring Liam Neeson) earns high marks for transferring the style and tone of the comic book form to the screen better than many official adaptations.





Above: Tim Burton's **BATMAN** (with Michael Keaton and Kim Basinger) set the current standard for filmic adaptations of comic books. Although disappointing to purists, the film earned praise for constructing an appropriate environment for the Dark Knight. Below: Catwoman (Michelle Pfeiffer) menaces Gotham beauty queen (Cristi Conaway) in **BATMAN RETURNS**, the darkly demented sequel.

Finally there's the bottom line. Whereas characters from novels and plays (which in the past have been a traditional source material for screenplays) do not easily lend themselves to marketing tie-ins to sell T-shirts, mugs, posters, sunglasses, music, fast food or—and this is the big one—toys, the fanciful characters from comic books (i.e. Batman, Spider-Man or even MIB) most certainly do, especially with younger consumers. Remember how the dark, gritty *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles* of Kevin Eastman and Peter Laird became transformed into the pizza-eating, surfer-talking, color-coded costume wearing, lovable heroes who, with the aid of a cartoon show and a live-action movie, absolutely conquered merchandising during 1990?

So on the one hand, many comic book illustrators and storytellers are downright exuberant about the prospect of transforming their comic book into a live-action, feature-length motion picture with big stars and state-of-the-art special effects. In a way, it would be the ultimate vindication of their work. And, of course, don't forget the money. Yet on the other hand,

they're also gripped with an ungodly fear that the whole venture might ultimately turn out to be nothing less than a disastrously bad movie. (As examples, they mention *CROW 2*, *PUNISHER*, *HOWARD THE DUCK*, and the later *SUPERMAN* and *BATMAN* sequels)

Comments by the artists on their accounts of comic book movies of the past have ranged from "pretty empty" and "flash over substance" to "repeated formulas" and "I'm completely losing faith in anything superhero related." All of the artists interviewed for this article were extremely dubious of Hollywood's ability—or even desire—to faithfully reproduce the spirit of their comic book work on screen.

Some suspected the problem resided with Hollywood itself. "It's a frustrating town and business," explained Rob Schrab, who recently sold the film rights to *Scud* (the story of an ill-fated, robot assassin who fights to survive in a surreal yet very lethal pop-culture future) to a well known director-producer-screenwriter. "Every cliché that anyone has ever heard about the scams and the double talk is completely true.





Scott Leva as SPIDERMAN, up for the role in the feature film when Cannon Films owned the rights in 1987. The big-budget project (inset), still on Marvel's development slate, is to be directed by James Cameron.

Everybody that puts their arm around your shoulders and says, 'Hey, we're gonna make a movie, and you're going to love it. You're going to be really involved,' is a liar. They lie to you all the time."

Schrab—who heaped praise on *THE ROCKY HORROR PICTURE SHOW* (directed by Joe Johnston) for its faithfulness to the artist's vision and its vintage look—had much to say on the issue of artists retaining creative control over the film adaptation of their comic work. "As soon as you sign on the dotted line, they can do anything they want. You won't believe what they will do." Schrab also said, "It's pretty much like saying, 'Here's my baby.' They take your baby away from you. Then, you don't see it for year. When you do see it again, they've not only shaved its head and dressed it differently, but they've also given it a sex change."

While discussing the issue of casting big-name, megastars to play comic book characters, Schrab commented, "I think they ruin it. They don't do it for the art of it. They do it to fur-

ther their careers. In Hollywood, it's all about how much money they can make overseas," he said, commenting on the ability of "event" pictures to cross language barriers and thus command a global audience. "Like Arnold Schwarzenegger, Jim Carrey or Sylvester Stallone—they make so much money overseas and that's all they care about. So if they cast Stallone in *JUDGE DREDD*, they know they're going to make a ton of money. Even though *DREDD* did really bad here, they made all their money back

overseas, and then some. You just can't argue with a business executive in Hollywood about that."

Another reason, say artists, that comic book movies turn out so bad is that comic books are simply not respected in America. They're not taken seriously as either a great form of art or literature. They're considered merely these "little things" that only "kids" or "nerds" read. Accordingly, directors drench the movies with self-parody, making the film more of an "over the top" farce than

Comic book artists cite *BARB WIRE* (with Pamela Anderson Lee) as an example of Hollywood's abysmal track record at adapting comic books to the screen.



anything else.

"It's an interesting conundrum," said Scott McCloud, 36, (author of *Zot!* the widely respected *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art*, and an upcoming graphic novel *The New Adventure of Abraham Lincoln*), "that when a comic book is drafted into a bad movie, we blame it on the comic book. Whereas if a movie is drafted into a bad comic book, we can [still] blame it on the comic book. Which, to me, seems unfair." McCloud added, "So often movies are dumbed down in order to make them feel more like what many people's perceptions of comics are. Which is a real shame."

As an example of McCloud's view, other artists shared their disappointment that, in their opinion, Fox's *BATMAN: THE ANIMATED SERIES* was more mature in style than the live-action movies, which are supposedly intended for an adult audience. And they wonder why Frank Miller's graphic novel *Batman: The Dark Knight Returns* (the story of an older Bruce Wayne who, after a decade of retirement, returns as Batman to fight crime in an almost post-apoca-

“So often, movies are dumbed down in order to make them feel more like people’s perceptions of what comic books are,” said McCloud. “Which is a shame.”

lyptic Gotham City) was never made into a movie. Conversely, these same fans commend Sam Raimi’s *DARKMAN*, which was not adapted from a comic book but was inspired by them in style and tone, for offering so much more in the way of tragedy and powerful storytelling.

“The best thing about the first two *BATMAN* movies,” stated Jhonen Vasquez (Slave Labor Graphics), creator of *Johnny the Homicidal Maniac* (the modern gothic tale of a witty yet savage serial killer), “is that Tim Burton constructed an entire world for Batman. In comic books, it’s great to see this guy in a cool get-up; it’s so bizarre. But in the movies, you just can’t do that.” He added that comic book characters can easily look out of context and “goofy” unless someone constructs an environment which matches the surreality of the character.

Vasquez gives Joel Schumacher’s *BATMAN FOREVER* low marks for building an unconvincing world where the audience could see the “seams” between the real world actors and the world they were trying to create. Yet he applauds the foreign film *CITY OF LOST CHILDREN* for its sumptuous visuals and painstaking inventiveness. “[It] created its own lost world; every set, every outfit, every hair style—it’s just thick with atmosphere.”

Likewise on the topic of film makers creating a “comic book” world, another artist conjectured, “The big mistake that movie makers tend to make when they want to make a movie out of a comic book, is that they go ‘I’m going to make it look big and flat and do it all in primary colors.’ Yet these guys would never dream of translating a novel to the screen and putting words in the background. Or you’d never imag-

ine a director trying to adapt a Broadway play all in long-shots because that’s what it’s like for a theater audiences at a play.”

Kurt Busiek, one of the writers for *Astro City*, foresees two main obstacles to the prospect of turning his comic (the continuing saga in the daily lives and personal moments of some all too human, Midwestern superheroes) into a film. First, it would cost too much to make, somewhere in the range of \$180 million. Second, he fears that Hollywood would try to transmute it into a mere action/adventure movie, more about “grand spectacle” and “blowing things up” than allowing it to be about the compelling human drama that Busiek sees as essential to the whole *AC* series.

“*AC* is a character piece,” Busiek explained. “It isn’t about the action. Action is simply the context against which the drama happens. So I could easily imagine taking the first six issues and sort of braiding them together into a big Robert Altman movie.” Busiek names Altman’s *SHORT CUTS* as a model he’d like to see used for an *AC* movie.

“In comics,” argued Busiek, speaking metaphorically, “we



Scott McCloud, author of *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art*. “When a comic is made into a bad film, we blame it on the comic, which seems unfair.”

have an unlimited budget. But in the movies, you don’t. The bigger [the movie] gets, the more expensive it gets. So, then when there’s more riding on it, then it gets more commercial so there would be so many things pulling *Astro City* in so many directions that nobody would be happy with the final result.” By “commercial,” Busiek is referring to the phenomena of investors like McDonalds, Coca Cola or Taco Bell, who fork over big dollars in exchange for merchandising tie-ins with summer “event” flicks and, consequently, have some influence over the development of the movies. (For example, when Joel Schumacher signed on for *BATMAN FOREVER*, his first task was not to develop a script but to attend a meeting to assure potential merchandisers that he would be making a kinder, gentler film that wouldn’t scare kiddies as *BATMAN RETURNS* had done).

Nevertheless, artists refuse to believe that it is impossible to make good movies based on

comic books. Some, like Scott McCloud, feel it is a matter of attracting the right film makers. “I think most likely the independent comics which are in line to be adapted for movies [will be produced by] their cousins in independent films,” he said. In fact, all the artists interviewed expressed a deep admiration for such small budget, independent films as *SLING BLADE* and *TRAINSPOTTING*. They believe that the makers of these films—with their singularity of vision, imagination, and attention to human drama—would, correspondingly, bring out what they saw as best in their comics.

Or the solution might lie in trying to wean Hollywood off the idea that every comic book adaptation must be a “superhero” movie. They suggested that idiosyncratic comic book stories such as Chris Ware’s *Jimmy Corrigan: World’s Smartest Boy*, *Optic Nerve*, or *Jar of Fools* might be a needed change for Hollywood.

However, only time will tell what shape the future will take for the genre of comic book movies. Perhaps Kurt Busiek summed it up best when he said, “Hopefully, what [movie] people will start to do, now that the novelty is wearing off a little, is to try and make the movie about the characters the same way they would a novel or a play. I hope we’ll get to see more good movies than bad. But we’ll probably see more bad. That’s the way it works. But perhaps, it will break down people’s preconceptions of what you’d expect out of a comic book or even a comic book movie.” □

Rob Schrab, creator of *Scud: the Disposable Assassin*, laments of Hollywood: “As soon as you sign on the dotted line, they can do anything they want.”



PROPHECY 2

Christopher Walken continues the Angel Wars in the new direct-to-video sequel.

By Sue Feinberg
& Judd Hollander

Hell one night, heaven the next, fallen angels the third. It's all in a day's work for director Greg Spence, helmer of Miramax's PROPHECY II, a direct-to-video release that should be in stores January. (The film is a sequel to the 1995 Greg Widen movie.) Combining fantasy and horror, PROPHECY is set in post-apocalyptic Los Angeles, where two sects of angels do battle, with the fate of mankind in the balance. On one side is "Danyel" (Russell Wong) who has come to fulfill an ancient prophecy, which requires him to impregnate a human (Jennifer Beals); and on the other is the fallen angel "Gabriel," played by Christopher Walken, who will do anything to stop him.

With PROPHECY II, Spence is two for two—in sequels that is. His first film, as director, was CHILDREN OF THE CORN IV: THE GATHERING. After the powers-that-be at Miramax saw a rough cut of that movie, they offered Spence the second PROPHECY. He accepted the job and was quite happy with the experience.

A native of Colorado, Spence knew from an early age he wanted a career in film. "I was always interested in movies. Which, if you grow up in Colorado, expresses itself through a bunch of little 8mm ski movies." Several of which he did in junior high. At age 16, Spence got a job working with the Denver affiliate for the Gan-



Prisoners of Gabriel, Jennifer Beals and Angel Danyel (Russell Wong), protecting their unborn half human/half angel child to be the savior of mankind.

nett organization. ("We used to do a bunch of religious shows and furniture warehouse commercials.")

Then it was off to New York University's Film School, where he supported himself by working as a bartender and script reader, the latter being something he recommends for anyone wanting to get involved in the industry. "The way the entertainment industry works, I think anyone who has a true desire, has to be willing to knock on doors and say, 'I'll work for

free.' People will almost always give them that opportunity. Whether that eventually turns to pay work or not, you can never tell. Usually you have to pay your dues, but if you're really interested in what you're doing, the dues-paying time tends to go by very quickly."

While at NYU, he worked as a production assistant and wrote several feature-length scripts on his own. Eventually, he learned that Miramax was looking for someone to write voiceovers on an American release of a foreign

film they were distributing. That marked the beginning of his association with Miramax, working on several films for them. He later moved to Los Angeles. However, when Miramax decided to expand their West Coast offices, they tracked him down and offered him a job. "I became director of production, West Coast and would basically oversee films for them."

During this period of time, writing and directing was never far from Spence's mind. "Harvey and Bob Weinstein said, 'Someday you'll make a movie for us.' I'm not sure I believed them, not because they're not upright guys, but when people say that in Hollywood, you never know if that will happen. The Weinsteins kept their word." When Spence decided it was time to move on, they offered him his first professional directing job. ("And Bob said, 'Here's a CHILDREN OF THE CORN movie, go cut your teeth on that.'" CORN was not Spence's first venture into the realms of science-fiction and horror. Previously he had done some work on the HELLRAISER series and developed a few things for Miramax's Dimension line with Clive Barker.) And after that came PROPHECY II.

Spence had seen the first PROPHECY and had a pretty clear vision for the sequel. "I think you always go into a movie with an idea of how you want to do it. The big challenge is trying to maintain that vision all the way through production." (Spence also co-wrote the



Gabriel's messenger of death in the video sequel, hitting stores January 20.

script with Matt Greenberg.) "Dimension knew they wanted to get Walken back and they knew they were interested in the Archangel "Michael," who didn't appear in the first film. "I think we were [all] interested in seeing the interesting elements of mythology kept, but making the film a little more genre [driven], a little racier and maybe a little more scary than the first one. We were interested in conveying what we

felt was an ancient story, so we searched through Genesis and we came up with some great stuff. By the end of the movie, I think those things fused so much, the film becomes almost otherworldly."

The film centers around a place where those who are cast into hell can return, ("We built a section of a parking lot and cracked it open") and where nobody is what they seem. (Except for one scene in a church,

Walken as Gabriel, director Greg Spence and Brittany Murphy as Izzy, the young girl kidnapped by Walken in order to prevent the birth of a new messiah.



DIRECTOR GREG SPENCE

"Taking on a film is like having a wife, child and job rolled up into one. So you want to be careful, for everybody's sake, that you really have an attachment to whatever project you take."

played in silhouette, all the traditional trappings of angels, (halos, wings, harps, etc.) are absent. To add to the supernatural atmosphere, more than 75% of the film was shot from dusk to dawn; (a "vampire-shift schedule," according to a press release), giving the movie what Spence called a "more realistic and gritty look. We would arrive on the set at dusk and shoot all night," he recalled. "Six nights a week. Fortunately, it was a great bunch of people to stay up all night with."

While it was important that the entire production team was in sync, casting the film was just as important. "Casting is always an interesting part of the process because there are so many factors. There is finding the talent that the studio likes, that you also like, and who seem to share the same idea of the movie that you have in your head. I think I was pretty fortunate in this one, because all the cast I got was really into it and we had a lot of fun. Which sometimes isn't the case, but this time it was."

There was also the question of special effects. The scene of Walken returning from hell uses "computer generated stuff, light gags, a lot of smoke (we used that to sink a BMW) and a real parking lot we made to look melted. We had some really great physical effects people and built a big section of parking lot" on a big stage over the real one.

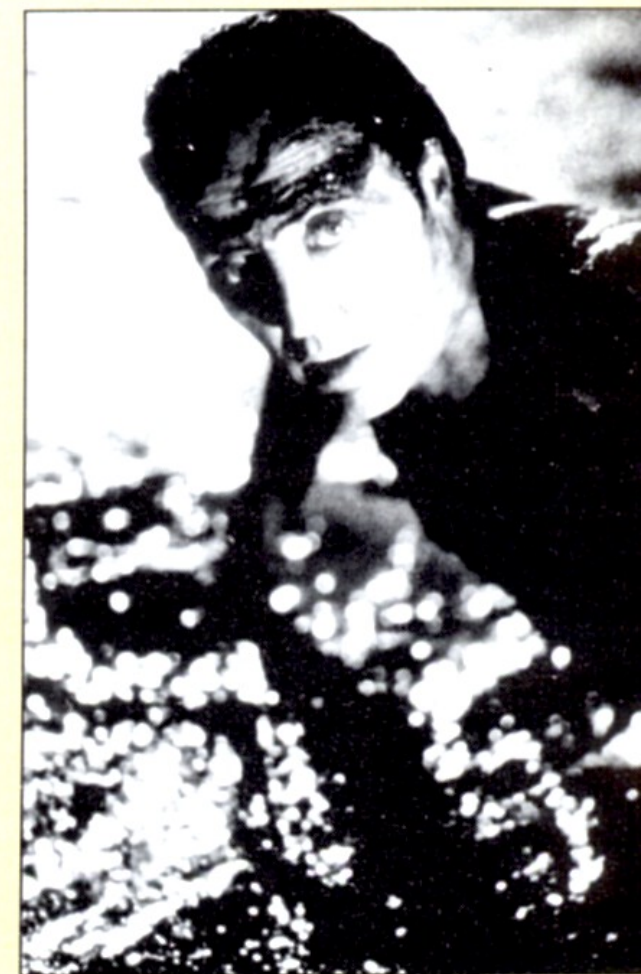
Another important aspect of the film was the humor. ("We had a lot of fun with Walken's lines.") Other funny bits, also with Walken, played on the "fish-out-of-water" scenario. Walken's character is one of the most powerful beings in the world, with vast knowledge of the workings of the universe, but when it comes to day-to-day earthly things, he's completely out of his depth. For example,

he doesn't know how to turn on an oven or drive a car; both of which were exploited for comic effect.

With PROPHECY II Spence and company were able to make the film they envisioned. Within certain budgetary limitations. "A lot of times," Spence noted, "you don't get to do everything you would like to do, but the producers and myself were all very much on the same page [and] as long as we didn't spend too much money, we were allowed to make the movie we wanted."

There will probably be a PROPHECY III, but Spence is busy writing two scripts he plans to direct, and will produce an independent feature in the spring. His advice for aspiring filmmakers? "Taking on a film is like having a wife and a child and a job all rolled up into one. So you want to be really careful, for everybody's sake, that you really have a calling for, or an attachment to whatever project you take." □

Takes a lickin' but keeps tickin,' Walken as Gabriel, keeps coming back in the best horror film tradition.



IN SPACE NO ONE CA

The Science-Fiction Fil

In the conclusion of our retrospective, the leaves musicals behind to explore outer

When Robert Wise picks up the 26th American Film Institute Life Achievement Award on February 19, you can bet that most observers will be fondly recalling his classic musicals *WEST SIDE STORY* and *THE SOUND OF MUSIC*. Yet Wise himself is equally proud of another, less noted facet of his career: science-fiction, fantasy, and horror films. In-between musicals, dramas, and war films (*THE SAND PEBBLES*, *THE DESERT RATS*, *STAR!*), Wise found time to craft a handful of subtle yet highly effective genre films. In fact, his very first directing credit (shared with Gunther Von Fritsch, whom he replaced midway through shooting) was on 1942's *CURSE OF THE CAT PEOPLE*. In part one of our retrospective we examined this film and Wise's other three horror-fantasy efforts: *THE BODY SNATCHER*, *THE HAUNTING*, and *AUDREY ROSE*. Now, we turn our attention to his three science-fiction efforts: *THE DAY THE EARTH STOOD STILL*, *THE ANDROMEDA STRAIN*, and *STAR TREK: THE MOTION PICTURE*.

After his second horror film, *THE BODY SNATCHER*, in 1945, six years passed before Wise took on another genre effort, *THE DAY THE EARTH STOOD STILL* (1951). During that time, the well-received boxing drama *THE SET-UP* (1949) had helped him rise from the talented B-unit at RKO Studios (where he had directed his two horror films for producer Val Lewton) to become an A-list director working at a major studio, 20th Century

By Frederick C. Szebin



Robert Wise on the set of *THE ANDROMEDA STRAIN* (1970), about an extraterrestrial disease that wipes out a whole town except, mysteriously, for a baby and an old man.

Fox. *DAY THE EARTH STOOD STILL* was based on the short story *Farewell to the Master* by Harry Bates. Published in the October 1940 issue of *Astounding* magazine, the story took place in an indeterminate future. Journalist Cliff Sutherland hides in a wing of the Smithsonian Institute built around a humanoid robot, Gnut, and its spaceship, which had also brought the alien ambassador Klaatu. Klaatu had been killed by a mad sniper's bullet and put in a mausoleum. To assure that the immovable Gnut didn't seek revenge, the

silent robot was put through acids and heat rays, remaining ever silent and still. Six months after the event Sutherland, through his photographs of Gnut, discovers that the robot has indeed moved. He hides in the museum to witness a bizarre series of cloning events that Gnut has been carrying on—a wayward hummingbird, a human scientist, and even a rampaging gorilla!

To recreate Klaatu, Gnut uses vocal recordings of the alien ambassador's only words on earth. But the clone is imperfect and dying, so Sutherland wants

to rush the alien to the hospital. But it is too late; Gnut enters the ship to return from whence he came, and Sutherland is left with the irony that the robot Gnut, and not Klaatu, was the master all along.

The story was bought by Fox in 1950 and put on the boards by Fox head Darryl Zanuck. Producer Julian Blaustein was put onto the project, and Edmund H. North was hired to write the screenplay.

"I got a call from Darryl Zanuck," recalled Wise on his initial involvement with the film. "I was under contract to Fox, and he was running the studio. He said, 'I think you should go over to see Julian Blaustein. He's got a script there I think you might find interesting.' I got the script, went away and read it, came right back, and said, 'I want to do it. Let's go.' I loved the idea of having a benign alien come to earth for the good of the world and not to destroy us," Wise continued. "We got threatened at the end unless we behave, but his mission is really a peaceful one. I think I had very few suggestions or changes on the script. Ed North did a marvelous job on it."

Only choice elements were chosen from the original story to be used in the screenplay: Klaatu and his robot (or the robot and his Klaatu!) are on a peaceful mission; the mechanoid is in charge of Klaatu's race; Klaatu dies and is brought back to life, if only for a brief time. The biggest change was removing the story from the future and setting it in modern times.

"One of the reasons that the film has lasted as long and as well as it has," said Wise, "is

DO YOU HEAR YOU SING

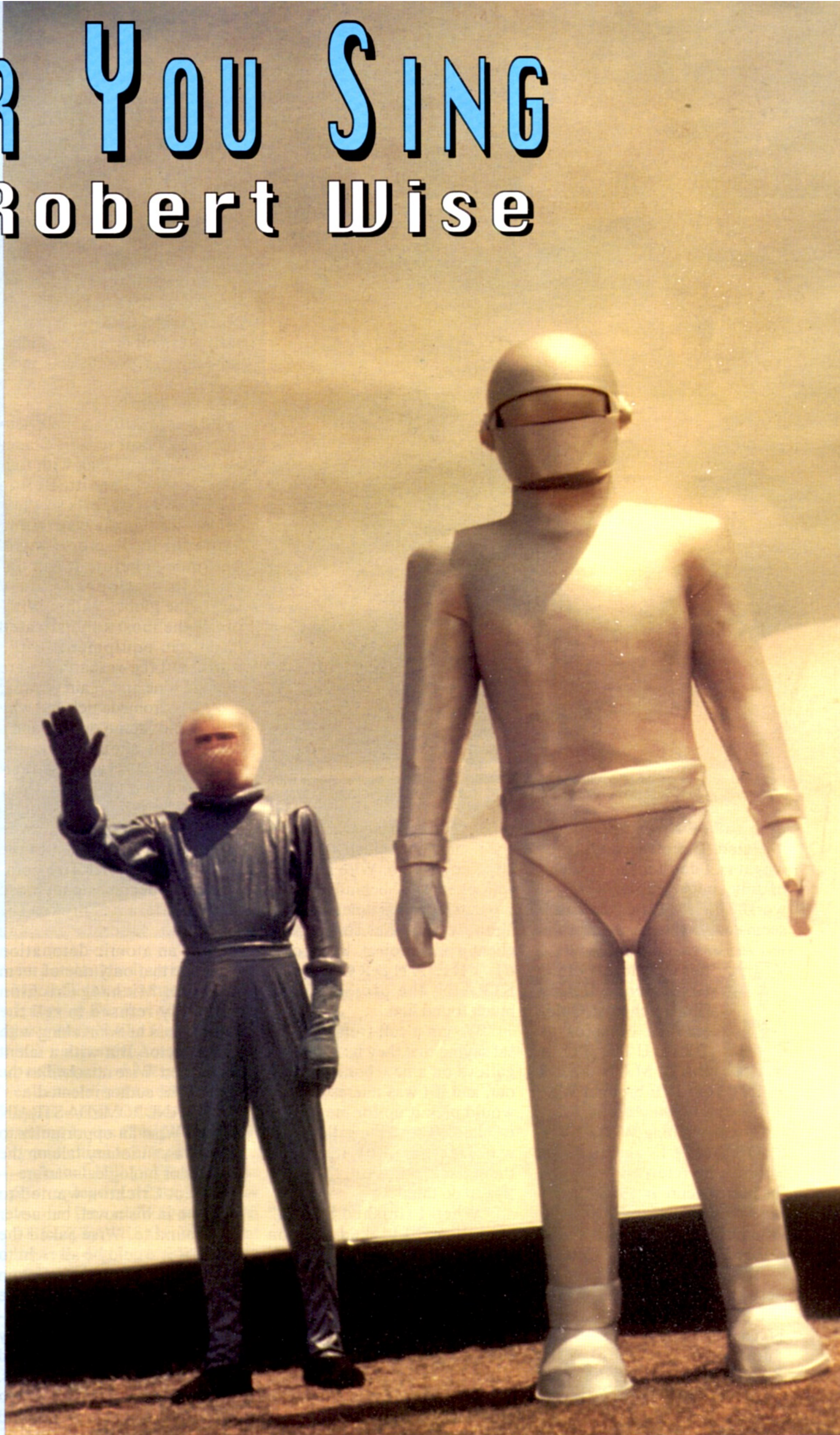
films of Robert Wise

director space.

because it was made very contemporary. I think the fact that it was made in our capital, that you see very familiar sights such as the Washington Monument, the Lincoln Monument, the Capital Building, all these things, gives the film a great anchor in reality. I think it was a big plus."

Author Steve Rubin wrote a wonderfully-detailed history of the film in the Volume 4, Number 4 issue of *Cinefantastique*, to which little new can really be added. But in 1995, Wise was honored with a remastered laser disk of the film, which includes interviews with the director and stars conducted by director and film historian Nicholas Meyer. "Next to WEST SIDE STORY and THE SOUND OF MUSIC, DAY THE EARTH STOOD STILL is my best-known film, both here and abroad," said Wise. "I loved having it come out on laser disk. I'd love to have people see it in the theater again, but there's no chance of that unless you manage to get to a film festival someplace.

"I think the film holds up wonderfully well," he continued. "The main aspect of any film is what I call the foreground: the story, the plot, the people, the dialogue, all of that. Sure, it's fine to have great special effects, great locations, but you won't necessarily have that foreground. I think it holds up very well compared to later science fiction, mainly because of the story, the script, and the idea. I heard that Fox thought of doing a sequel to it about 10 or 12 years ago, and they developed a story. But that plan went away after they saw what the writer had come up with. That's fine. I don't particularly



Ambassador from outer space Klaatu (Michael Rennie) and his robot Gort, in the classic 1951 THE DAY THE EARTH STOOD STILL.



Persis Khambatta as the alien Ilia and Stephen Collins as Captain Decker merge with the robot probe V'ger in the climax of *STAR TREK: THE MOTION PICTURE* (1979).

care to see it remade or sequelized. I'm pleased with the way it is. I don't mean to sound unduly smug, but it's there—it works and it holds up. The film seems to go on year after year."

After the success of his first science-fiction film, such post-Golden Age classics as *TRIBUTE TO A BAD MAN* and *I WANT TO LIVE* brought Wise to the end of the 1950s. After the Oscar-winning *WEST SIDE STORY* (1961) at Goldwyn Studios, he returned briefly to the horror genre in 1963, directing *THE HAUNTING*, an adaptation of Shirley Jackson's novel *The Haunting of Hill House*.

Wise then made some of his best-known films: *SOUND OF MUSIC* (1965, which netted him another two Oscars for producing and directing), *THE SAND PEBBLES* (1966), and *STAR!* (1968), which was a disappointment at the time, but has since been given reconsideration by critics and film buffs.

By 1969, Wise was a free agent, not contractually-obligated to any studio. With his final splashy musical behind him, the director bided his time while his agent went about finding his client a new project. In the case of *THE ANDROMEDA STRAIN*, the project pretty much found him.

"We got a call from Universal saying that they had seen the galleys on a new book coming out, and if I was interested they would pick it up for me," Wise recalled. "I read the galleys and was fascinated by it, called them back, and said, 'Yes, I'd like to do this.'"

"When I finished *STAR!*" said Wise, "I looked back on the films I had done and realized that since 1963 when I started on *SOUND OF MUSIC*, through *THE SAND PEBBLES* and then *STAR!*, I had been making period pictures all that time. I needed something very contemporary. I was done with period stuff; I didn't want to do any more. There wasn't anything more contemporary than

THE ANDROMEDA STRAIN. It happened to fall into a genre need that I felt. It wasn't that I was looking for science fiction particularly, but it certainly was contemporary, and that's what I was looking for."

THE ANDROMEDA STRAIN recounts a 5-day scientific crisis when a NASA probe used to collect high-altitude microorganisms crashes in the Nevada desert, instantly killing everyone in a small desert community except for two diverse individuals—an elderly drunkard and a crying baby.

Project Wildfire, a multi-level state of the art scientific facility, is called into play with four men—Stone, Leavitt, Burton and Hall, all experts in their fields—leading the way to find a cure for the microorganism Andromeda before it can unleash its unstoppable fury across the globe. Within Wildfire is the most sophisticated scientific equipment in the world, but the researchers are stymied time and again on what makes Andromeda tick and why only an old Sterno drinker and a crying baby should have survived when everyone else literally dropped dead in their tracks. The scientists begin to understand Andromeda when one of them is exposed to the organism. The Wildfire computer then becomes convinced that the strain has broken the seals in the laboratory, which sets off an atomic detonation sequence that only one of them can stop. Michael Crichton originally refused to sell the novel unless he went along with it as director. But with a talent like Robert Wise attached to the project, the author relented.

THE ANDROMEDA STRAIN offered Wise an opportunity to portray a cautionary tale on the dangers of biological warfare—a subject Crichton wanted to touch on in his novel, but never got around to. Wise asked the author if it would be all right to add an argument to the script on just what Project Scoop's probe was doing in the upper atmosphere—searching for potentially useful biological weapons—and the author immediately said yes.

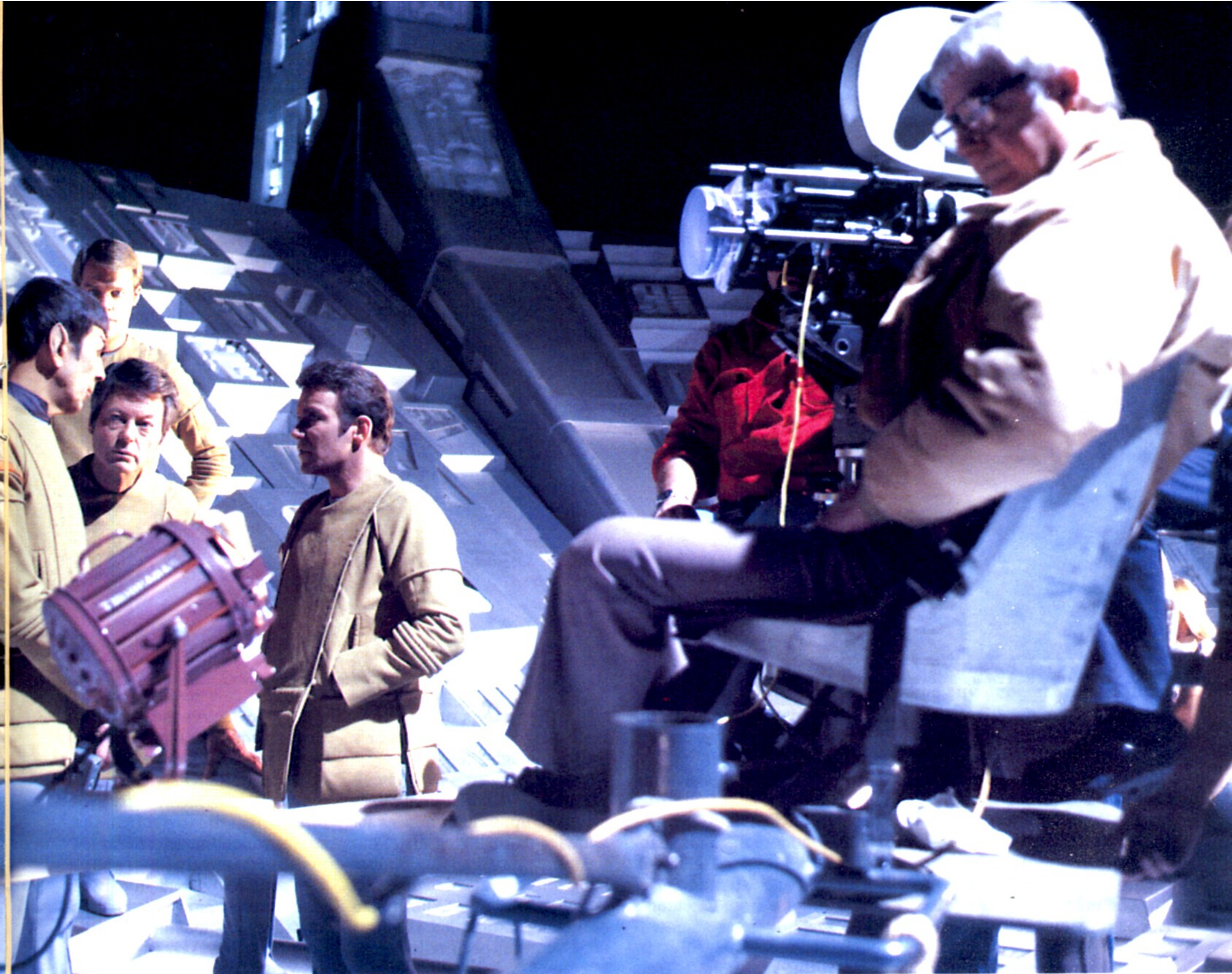
Once again, Wise turned to Nelson Gidding, who had adapted *THE HAUNTING*. Gidding made certain changes,



but only to the point of tightening the novel's narrative for cinematic purposes. The biggest change occurred to Dr. Peter Leavitt, who appears as Ruth in the film.

"One of Nelson's major contributions as a writer was in *THE ANDROMEDA STRAIN*," said Wise. "We were in preliminary stages with the script, and Nelson came into my office one day and said, 'What would you think if we made Leavitt a woman?' I said, 'Get the hell out of my office. I can see it now: Raquel Welch in a submarine...'"

"Changing Dr. Leavitt to a woman was the hardest thing to convince the studio about," added Gidding. "I felt that the character in the novel wasn't particularly good. I said that putting a woman into the midst



Above: For *ST:TMP*, Robert Wise (r) prepares to film a shot on the V'ger deck with (l to r) Leonard Nimoy as Mr. Spock, Stephen Collins as Decker, DeForest Kelley as Dr. McCoy, and William Shatner as Captain Kirk. Below: Wise on the set of the Enterprise bridge with *STAR TREK* creator Gene Roddenberry, Shatner, and Nimoy.

of the other characters would bring everything more to life.”

“He started to describe the kind of woman he saw in the role,” said Wise. “That was interesting, but I didn’t want to violate the scientific community by doing something false. We had a couple scientists working with us who had read the book. I called them in and said, ‘What would you think if this character Leavitt were a woman?’ and I described the kind of character Nelson had in mind. Both of them said that it was very believable. They said, ‘We have more and more women scientists every year.’ We cast Kate Reid in the part, and Leavitt turned out to be the most interesting character of the bunch.”

Instead of big name stars, Wise sought a cast of character actors with proven abilities but

no particular drawing power. His thought was that a star like Gregory Peck would simply have looked like Gregory Peck in a jump suit. Actors without preconceived identity would enhance the near-documentary approach of the story, thereby adding to the film’s believability and ultimate effectiveness.

Arthur Hill (*PETULIA*) was Stone, leader of the Wildfire team. David Wayne (*THE THREE FACES OF EVE*) lent his hang dog features to the role of Dutton, with James Olson (*MOON ZERO TWO*) as Hall and Kate Reid (*THIS PROPERTY IS CONDEMNED*) as Leavitt. Also included as an unofficial fifth member of the Wildfire team was Paula Kelly, who later appeared in *SOYLENT GREEN*.

During the late 1960s, as





The new USS Enterprise in space dock, ready to explore new worlds in *STAR TREK: THE MOTION PICTURE*, effects supervised by Douglas Trumbull.

Apollo put man on the moon and brought him back again, there was genuine concern over the possibility of an astronaut carrying a microscopic bit of cosmic death back to Earth. Astronauts from the early missions were put in medical confinement until it was discovered that the moon really is as lifeless as it seems. To keep within the believability of diagnosing and fighting an extraterrestrial virus or bacterium, Wise and Gidding consulted the Jet Propulsion Laboratory and kept Cal Tech scientific advisors on the payroll throughout production to ensure that the cinematic

fight against Andromeda remain as scientifically-accurate as possible.

It's because of this striving for authenticity that Gidding considers *THE ANDROMEDA STRAIN* a more difficult adaptation than *THE HAUNTING*. There was only so much Gidding could use from Crichton's book. The novel has an extensive bibliography allegedly garnered during research. 'Effects of chlorazine on Aviary Metabolism: A Rate-Dependent Decoupler', 'Sporulation and Calcium Dipicolonate Concentrations in Cell Walls,' and 'Salicylism and Metabolic Acidosis,' along with

two other pages of citations were a figment of the author's brilliant imagination.

"A lot of what's in the book is baloney," said Gidding. "It's all made up. Crichton has vast knowledge. Realizing that, I did the same thing in the script. I've been told that all the voices on the intercom in the Wildfire lab seem so accurate. It's all made up. I've never been called on it, but now I probably will be.

"*THE ANDROMEDA STRAIN* was difficult to adapt," he continued. "There was a breakthrough point in it, after which it became easier. We had these scientists from JPL as advisors. I would want to put something in the script and would be told, 'You cannot do that. You can't say that. It's absolutely inaccurate.' One problem I had involved what height above the earth we could believably put the Scoop capsule. How high should it go—300, 400 miles? I was told, 'If you put it in outer space you can do anything you want.' That was a breakthrough. Crichton had the capsule at 200-300 miles. We put it beyond that into outer space. At that point we were free to create."

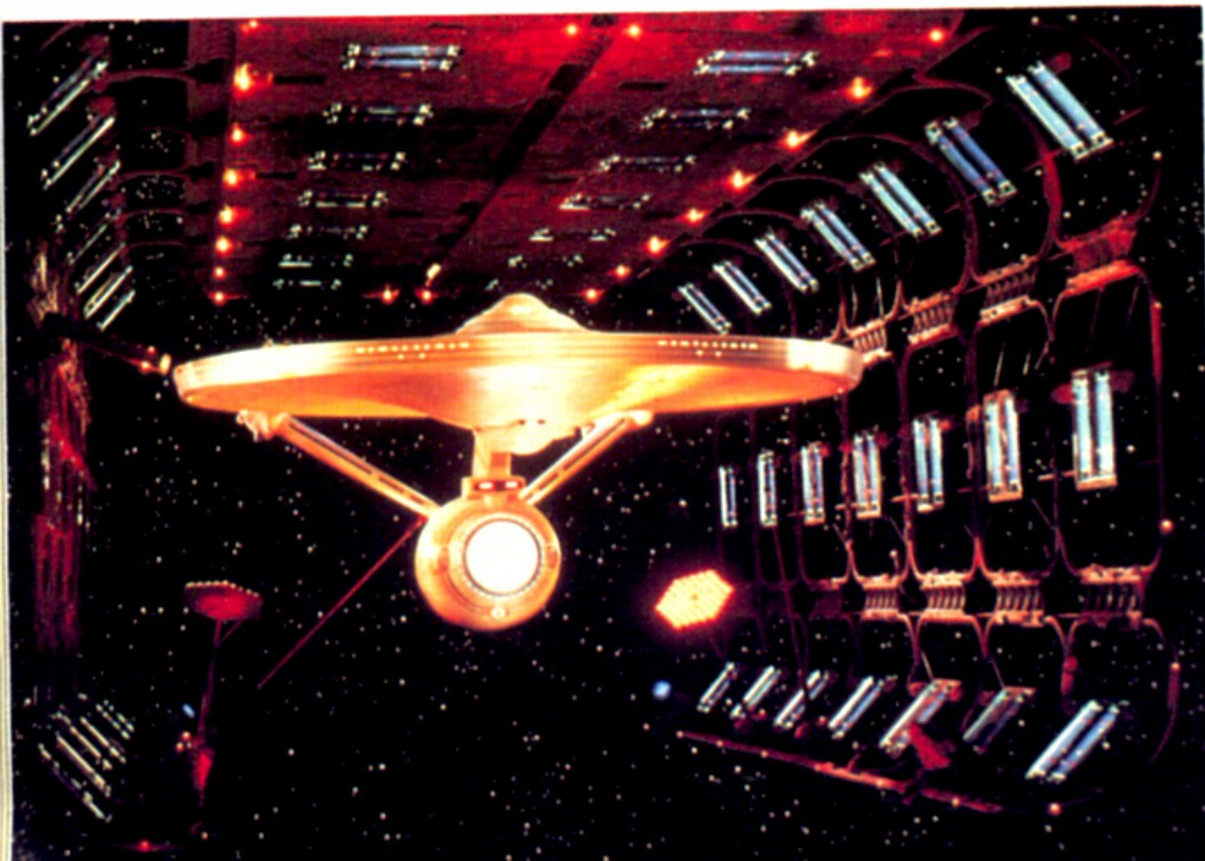
Universal put up a \$7-million budget. Though huge for the time, it wouldn't have been

enough to cover the scope of the project. JPL lent Wise the use of up to \$2.5-million worth of their equipment in the making of the film, including the robotic arms used to test the strain, which the actors learned to use very adeptly.

Crichton wasn't involved with scripting or production, but he did visit the set as often as possible. "Frankly, I wouldn't have contacted him about doing the screenplay," said Wise, "because most times I'm a believer of hiring a professional screenwriter to make an adaptation rather than have the original author work on it. So often, the original author is so close to the material that he finds it difficult to see what needs to be condensed or changed around to make a better dramatic piece out of it. Later on, after we started to shoot, we had contact. We gave him a draft of our script before shooting began, and he liked it very much. He had some comments to make, improvements in dialogue here and there. Otherwise, he seemed to be happy with it."

He was on the set often," Gidding added about Crichton. "He said to me, 'Why don't you direct?' I said, 'No. Maybe I'll direct something somebody else writes, but for what I write I

Wise rehearses James Doohan as Scotty on the expanded engineering deck set.



want to have a very good director.' He said, 'That's bunk! There's nothing to it. It's easy.' And by God he proved it in his own case. He's a tremendously clever, intelligent man, very brilliant. He did it. I don't know if anyone else could, but he proved his point. 'Nothing to it,' he said. 'You look at a movie, watch a director, and you go off and do it.' I think he's a better writer, but he's a pretty good director—very competent."

To build Crichton's high-tech Wildfire lab, Wise turned to his favorite production designer, the late Boris Levin, who had previously worked on WEST SIDE STORY, SOUND OF MUSIC, THE SAND PEBBLES and STAR! The Wildfire sets were pretty much designed and built as they were described in the book: a multi-level laboratory constructed in a series of concentric circles, each given its own color. Only one of the curved corridors was built, then repainted as the scientists moved into the deeper levels.

"I worked with Levin on the Wildfire facility," said Gidding. "We talked about it even before he was hired onto the picture. The film was so expensive because that set was absolutely accurate, perhaps unnecessarily so in some ways. When something was described as being stainless steel, it was stainless steel. It wasn't paper mache, or however they do it. That gave an authenticity."

The biggest part of the set was the Core, the cat-walked and laddered tunnel that rose through all the levels, and up which Dr. Hall must struggle past defensive lasers to reach the nuclear disarming device before the lab is unequivocally "cleansed."

"The Core was so high," said Wise, "that we had to use the biggest stage Universal had, and even then they had to dig through the floor to make the bottom of the Core, and they had to go through the roof to build the different levels we needed." During his flight through the Core, Hall had to dodge a laser designed to stop saboteurs. A real laser was used for the sequence, low enough in voltage so it couldn't wound, but still powerful enough to

"Next to WEST SIDE STORY and SOUND OF MUSIC, DAY THE EARTH STOOD STILL is my best-known film," said Wise. "I think it holds up wonderfully."



THE DAY THE EARTH STOOD STILL: Gort the robot stands by while Michael Rennie's alien ambassador discusses Earth's future with Patricia Neal.

damage the actor James Olsen's eyes if he happened to look directly into it.

Olsen wasn't the only cast member to face danger during filming. In a genuinely chilling scene, a rhesus monkey is exposed to Andromeda so the scientists can test its effect on a living being. Once exposed, the monkey first shakes its head, then appears to be gasping for breath until it lies still in a heap, dead from the virus. Wise describes the process used to get such a believable performance from the simian actor;

"We knew that was going to be a tough one for us, and yet it was a vital scene. We had to show how virulent Andromeda was, but we didn't know how we were going to do it. We got the prop man in, the animal trainers; we got the monkeys in and played with them. We tried reversing the film and all kinds of things. Nothing came close to working. I was really stumped. Finally, we had a second assistant director named Jim Fargo who had some connections at USC. He said, 'Let me call the veterinary department, show them the scene, and see what they suggest on how

we might handle it.' So this is what they came back with, and this is how we did it:

"The area where the monkeys were kept in their cages was air-tight. We put an apple box about 2-feet tall out of frame, put a candle in it, lit the candle and then filled the whole bottom of the space with carbon dioxide. When the candle went out we knew that the carbon dioxide was up to that level. Then we brought the monkeys out and started filming. With the robotic arm we opened up the cage. All that torment shown on the screen was due to the fact that they couldn't breathe. Just before it looked like they were going to go, there was a man who reached in and got them out. We had a couple vets outside-with oxygen. We flushed them with oxygen and brought them back. This was all done under the watchful eyes of the ASP-CA. They had their representative there to see that we didn't do anything that would hurt the animals. I think we did it two or three times, and we didn't lose a monkey! Wasn't that a sim-

ple, clean solution to our problem? We could never have thought of that."

Special effects artists Douglas Trumbull and James Shourt developed a vision of Andromeda as a cuboid structure, multiplying and growing. The final element added to the film's high-tech, futuristic outlook was a proper musical score. Wise decided that a typical score composed of recognizable instrumentation would be wrong for the kind of technological thriller he wanted to make. He figured his best bet would be a totally electronic score, still quite a novelty at the time. Someone recommended the work of Gil Melle, who was later to score such 1970s fare as FRANKENSTEIN: THE TRUE STORY and THE SENTINEL. Wise listened to some of Melle's electronic work and brought him onto the project.

"I remember saying to him, 'Gil, I don't want you to bring me any underscoring that has any faint sound of any kind of instrument,'" Wise recalled. "Yet, I knew I needed a background score of some nature for heightened suspense, and to play things out. I just didn't want it to be a musical score."

"He was in the Decca lab at that time," Wise continued, "and he could only work at night because the record company was using it in the daytime. So he would come in at night and do a cue or two, and I'd run them the next day. I re-

Robert Wise on the set of THE ANDROMEDA STRAIN, with Michael Crichton, author of the book on which the film was based.





James Olsen dodges lasers in the climax of *THE ANDROMEDA STRAIN*, as he seeks to shut off a nuclear blast meant to prevent a deadly virus from escaping the lab.

member several times I would run a cue, and it would be fine; then I would hear something that sounded like a violin, a clarinet, or whatever. 'Nope, that's no good—it's a violin. Get something else in there.' The beauty about electronic music is that you can go back in and redo it and put the change right in, whereas if you've got a big orchestra, there's little chance of doing that. It's a very practical way to work. We kept at it that way, finally finishing a totally electronic score."

THE ANDROMEDA STRAIN was released in the spring of 1971 and did well, but was not the blockbuster that Wise and Universal had hoped for. The director had a profit participation in the film but never received anything from it. After 1971, Wise seemed to slow down as the 1970s unraveled. He made only two films from 1972 to 1978: the intimate love story *TWO PEOPLE* with Peter Fonda and Lindsay Wagner; *THE HINDENBURG*, with George C. Scott, a later entry in the disaster-movie cycle; and *AUDREY ROSE*, an adaptation of Frank DeFelitta's reincarnation novel.

Finally, in 1979, there came Wise's last science-fiction effort: *STAR TREK: THE MOTION PICTURE*, which has to be one of the most frustrating near-misses in the history of SF cinema. Though eagerly awaited during production, the film was reviled when it was released. In hindsight it isn't the grand mess it was once

thought to be; if you were to see it again after all this time, you might agree that all it really needs is another run through the editing bench.

Although the picture led to the rebirth of *STAR TREK* as a franchise (it was directly responsible for all that followed: films, new TV series, comic books, novelizations, action figures, fan glee approaching epiphany, and anything else *TREK* that you can name over the past 17 years), *STAR TREK: THE MOTION PICTURE* remains a work in progress, snatched from the artist's hands (literally) before the print was dry.

"It's not one of my favorites," Wise admitted. "I've had a lot of people tell me over the years, 'I think that film is very underrated. It's one of the best *STAR TREK* films ever made.' It certainly wasn't thought of that way at the time."

Throughout the 1970s, to

L to r: Kate Reid and David Wayne meet colleagues James Olsen and Arthur Hill within the entrance to the super-sterile underground lab in *ANDROMEDA STRAIN*.



"In a meeting, I said, 'Well, guys, ok, we open in December. What are you going to call it—THREE QUARTERS OF STAR TREK: THE MOTION PICTURE?'"

everyone's surprise, the three seasons of the original *STAR TREK* series had blossomed into near-legend once sold into syndication. The clamor for *TREK* was kept alive by conventions, books, a Saturday morning cartoon show, and finally the dubbing of the first space shuttle with the honored name of *ENTERPRISE*.

Even Paramount executives couldn't miss the commotion caused by the little sci-fi show everyone thought dead and buried since 1969. The studio brought Gene Roddenberry back in to create new episodes for a rebirthed *STAR TREK* series. He had commissioned several scripts and was signing cast members when even this plan was laid waste in favor of a big screen epic. To find a story big enough to be a *STAR TREK* motion picture, Roddenberry turned to "In Thy Image", a Harold Livingstone teleplay based on a story by Alan Dean Foster.

The myriad details of *STAR TREK*'s torturous route from TV to big screen are too numerous to discuss here. Check *The Lost Trek* by Edward Gross, and *The Making of STAR TREK: THE MOTION PICTURE* by Susan Sackett and Gene Roddenberry, for virtual texts on

how not to make a big budget SF movie.

Wise was near the top of Roddenberry's director wish list, but was involved with *AUDREY ROSE* when first considered. But *ST: TMP*'s long and winding road to a theater-near-you took so long that Wise was eventually available—after such names as George Lucas, Steven Spielberg, William Friedkin, and George Roy Hill passed on the project, and after Philip Kaufman (who helmed the remake of *INVASION OF THE BODY SNATCHERS*) bowed out. Wise accepted the project, unaware of the difficulties ahead of him.

"My problem with the film was two-fold," Wise said. "We had to start shooting before we were ready with the script, and the actors were on payroll even before I came on, because the original script was intended to be a major TV movie. Somewhere along the line, they decided to make it a feature film.

"It wasn't my best science fiction," Wise continued. "I was not a trekkie. I had not been caught up in the series. I knew of its popularity, but that was it. When it came time to do the film, I was intrigued by it because I thought that I had done two SF films that were earth-bound; maybe it was time I got up in the heavens!"

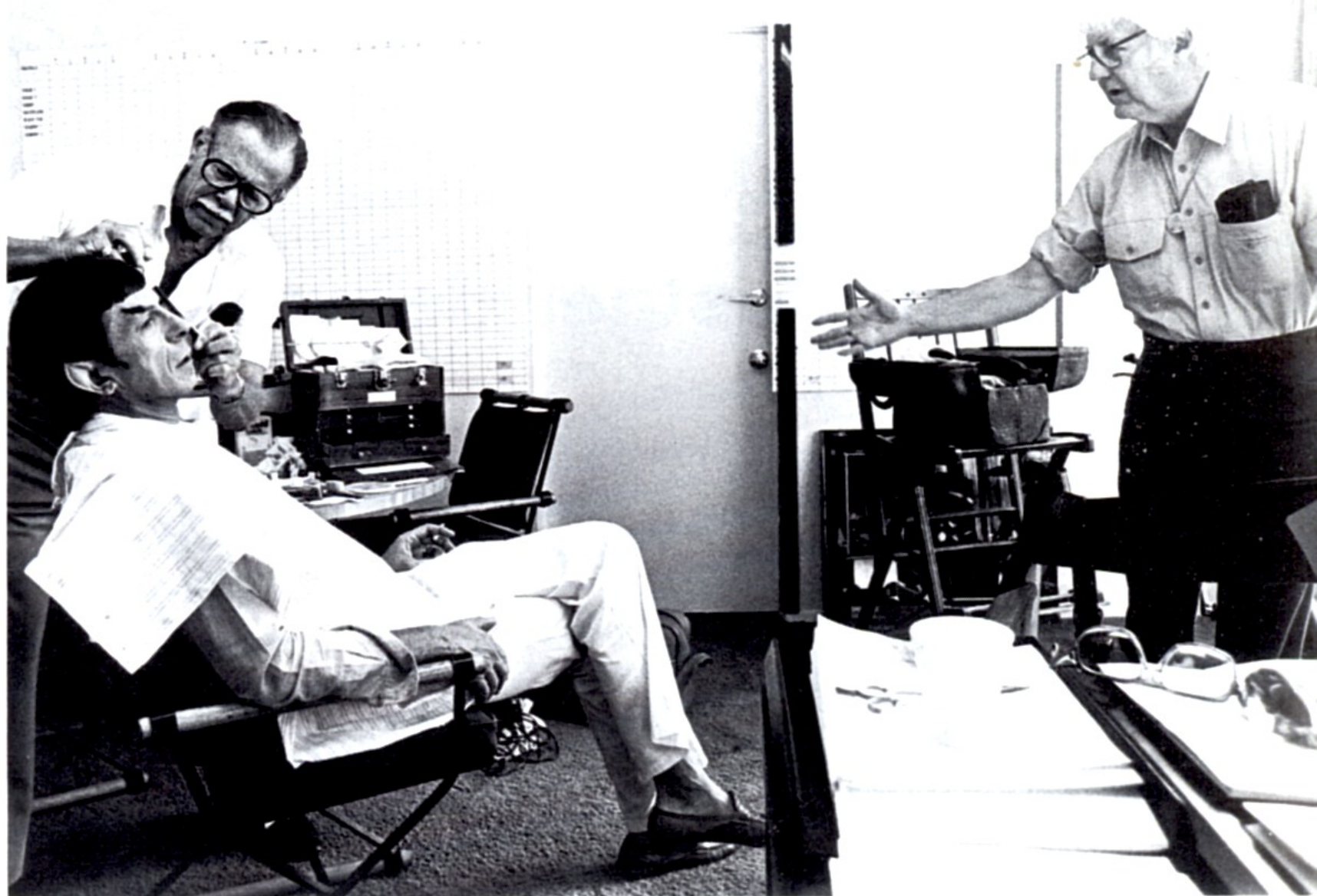
To prepare himself for entering the *STAR TREK* mythos, Wise watched several of what Roddenberry and then-Paramount chief Michael Eisner thought were among the series' best episodes. Impressed by some and leery of others, Wise was interested in the challenge of turning a TV concept into a silver screen production.

"We had to add the Spock character, who hadn't been in the first draft that was going to be done for TV," said Wise. "Leonard Nimoy said he didn't want to do Spock anymore. One

of the first things Roddenberry and I had to do was to convince Leonard that the show was going to be a big screen movie, and to come back to the character. We also had to get the script in shape, while the actors were still getting paid. Finally, Paramount said, 'We can't just keep paying these actors for just sitting around. You've got to start shooting,' and they gave us a start date. So, we had to start shooting with only the first act of the script complete. We were rewriting all the way through production, to the very last day. We were getting three sets of changes a day for the next day's work. It got so bad that they had to put the time of day along with the date on the new script changes. That's no way to work."

The other problem Wise had to face on the production was with the special effects. At that time, Robert Abel's company, which specialized in commercials, accepted the task of ST:TMP as their first foray into big-budget feature filmmaking. "Working with them was trying," Wise recalled. "Finally, we were almost finished shooting, and I was getting worried, having worked along with them on the set, about what they might produce. They had very talented people with them, but they were very, very slow. So I finally managed to see some tests on what they had done. When I saw the tests, I knew immediately that we were never going to get the picture done with them. We had a locked-in release date of Christmas, 1979. I had to go to the brass and say, 'Look, these people could probably finish it if we had two or three more years, but we don't have it.' They learned from that, of course, and some of their subsequent films were quite good, made much more economically. I was their guinea pig somehow."

"We had to let them go," Wise continued. "Fortunately, we got Doug Trumbull and John Dykstra to come on and split the work between them, but we were so far behind by then that they had to work their crews practically around the clock to meet our deadline. That ran the budget up untold millions. I resented so much money being spent on making a



Wise watches as the late Fred Phillips applies the Spock ears to actor Leonard Nimoy for STAR TREK: THE MOTION PICTURE.

movie based on a TV show. That's why it was not one of my favorite experiences."

If they had been unable to meet the studio-imposed deadline, Paramount could have been sued by the 500 theater owners who were expecting TREK for Christmas. Even with this pressure on, Wise tried to placate Paramount brass and beg for more time, but to no avail. "At one point, I was in a meeting with Eisner, Katzenberg, and Barry Diller, who wanted the picture done. I said, 'Well guys, ok. We open in December. What are you going to call it—THREE QUARTERS OF STAR TREK: THE MOTION PICTURE? Come on!' We finished on time, but only because everyone was working day and night."

"Right at the very end," Wise added, "we got our answer print. I would get up at 2:00 in the morning to check a print or just a reel. They were doing a reel at a time. I literally took the Washington, D.C. premiere print with me on the plane and had it under the bed in my hotel room the night of the premiere! There was literally no time to have a sneak preview. We just barely made the opening."

With 39 films under his belt, ST: TMP was the only one that

didn't have a sneak preview. (Twelve minutes had been trimmed early on; when the film was sold to TV, that footage was reinstated—a move the director felt was "a terrible thing to do.) Trade papers had seen the film a day or two earlier and gave it favorable reviews. But after the official premiere, other critics were not so kind, and word spread quickly that the long-awaited TREK movie was a dog.

"I was disappointed," Wise said of the critical reaction. "I always regretted not having a sneak preview, so we could do more editing on it. I think it could have stood a little cutting for pacing. Still, I think we had a better picture than we were given credit for."

This is certainly true. ST:TMP is a good movie made under terrible circumstances. A bit lengthy, it is still a fun space adventure. The Enterprise's journey through V'ger cloud structure is reminiscent of 2001: A SPACE ODYSSEY's stargate sequence: geometric designs and colorful streams of pure energy glide to the eye in much the same way Dave Bowman's journey to Grand Consciousness intrigued audiences a decade earlier. Excising 20 minutes would help the film im-

measurably, although it still would be no match for THE ANDROMEDA STRAIN for sheer SF tension.

STAR TREK: THE MOTION PICTURE proved to be Wise's last major theatrical release. In 1987, he made ROOFTOPS, a semi-musical starring Jason Getrick, that got some good notices but little attention at the box office. He had hoped to make a film in Poland with a French company, but after trips to the country, hiring a writer and casting Polish actors who could work in English, the project fell through. Over the past few years, the director has been a prime guest at film festivals around the world. Paris, London, Istanbul and Munich have honored him with retrospectives of his films, keeping the work of over 50 years alive.

Contemporaries filmmakers may churn out genre work by the mile, but volume cannot match the class, intelligence, and craft of a single Robert Wise genre film. Knowing how to use the tools of the trade to tell an interesting story is the simple secret of Wise success. Those who depend on ladled-on effects could learn a valuable lesson from a man who has done it so well for so long. □

THE POSTMAN

Kevin Costner delivers a futuristic epic,

By Dan Persons

According to producer Jim Wilson, he knew *THE POSTMAN* was a lock even before a single foot of film had passed through the camera: "It was a funny thing. I had a tremendous sensation on the final rehearsal in Tucson, when we had a read-through of the screenplay with thirty-five of the actors reading their parts. I got a huge rush because I heard the Postman play out his lines; I heard the humor where it ought to be. For the first time, it came to life off the page. And although we weren't filming it, I knew these characters for the first time were getting their parts. So, for me, part of the biggest rush was sitting in Tucson around a big table for a couple of hours, hearing the cast read aloud the script for the first time, and thinking that this can really work."

Such intuition, however, didn't surprise Kevin Costner, Wilson's fellow producer (along with Steve Tisch). "He's always trying to be first. I knew it about fifteen minutes before the table reading started. So I beat his ass again, didn't I? He's so slow, Jim. Slow."

If things have gotten a little competitive between the principals of *THE POSTMAN*, the Warner Bros.' post-apocalyptic, science-fiction fable that opened December 25th, it may be the result of a shoot that was based largely in some of the most rugged terrain of the American west—with locations in Arizona, Oregon, and Washington—and a director and star (Costner, taking his second spin in the director's chair after the Oscar-winning *DANCES WITH WOLVES*), who wouldn't have it any other way. "I knew the script would take me to the Pacific Northwest," said the triple-hyphenate, who brings his customary, stoic charm to



Director-producer-star Kevin Costner, wearing his costume for the title role, views a video playback on location for his new epic *THE POSTMAN*.

the title role, "which is one of my favorite places in the world, with its connecting rivers and that cycle of salmon and steelhead, that yearly event that takes place. So knowing that I was going to make *THE POSTMAN* in the Pacific Northwest and be able to, every day, see something like that, that's the joy of being in the film."

In telling the tale of an itinerant loner who stumbles upon the uniform of a long-dead postman and—in assuming the mail-carrier's role out of sheer desperation—inadvertently begins the reunification of a fragmented and feudalized United States, Costner chose his locations with an eye toward visual grandeur, including building a three-story high pacifist city suspended along the span of a working dam in Washington, and setting the base camp of the brutal, survivalist Holnists within the depths of an open mining pit in Arizona. Of the latter, Wilson said, "Kevin saw very early on some sketches from the designer [Ida Random] and some photographs that we

had taken of copper mines, open pit mines, and things like that. And Kevin said, 'I love the notion of General Bethlehem keeping his troops here.' He needed a place we could keep ten thousand troops—it was a big, big army. So he grabbed this idea of an open pit mine spiraling down to the bottom and placing Bethlehem up top where he could look over this domain of his, and he said, 'Look, I want every single sort of open pit, be it copper, whatever mineral mine, scouted.' So we did go to parts of California, Nevada, Arizona, Utah, Colorado. We went to six states and we looked at all the open pit mines and finally got it down to about six. And Arizona ended up winning out for that spot."

Added Costner, "That was pretty big. That kind of just came in my mind. We actually had a set at one point in Nevada, and it was kind of difficult dealing with the property owners—we had to move; we were afraid of the weather. And we went down and we found this other one that was even bigger,"

he laughed. "I don't know how it works. It just did."

Costner was no less reluctant to roll the dice with his co-stars, filling supporting roles with such relative unknowns as Will Patton as Holnist leader General Bethlehem, Larenz Tate as postal inductee (and auto enthusiast) Ford Lincoln Mercury, and screen newcomer Olivia Williams as love-interest Abby. "I don't feel the need to exclude well-known actors," Costner explained. "I just think what you're looking for is somebody that fits the part. I'm not really afraid of people that don't have a resume, you know. I can look into their hearts and into what they've done and try to decide if they're the right ones for it."

In some cases, though, "the right ones" were found no further than Costner's own doorstep. Not only did the producer-director-star give his daughter Ann the prominent role of Ponytail, a young mail-carrier who stands up to vengeful Holnists ("It was one of the most raw and truthful scenes," said co-star Williams about watching father and child work together. "The power of the relationship between Kevin and his daughter meant that they were very free with each other."); even Ann's younger sibling Joe got into the act, with a brief walk-on as a boy who has his letter picked up by the mounted Postman. "I was very proud of him," said Costner. "About 4:30 in the day, he sat down and he goes, 'Dad, I would like to quit now. I think we've done this scene long enough.' And I said my dad thing—director or dad—and I said, 'I know what you mean, Joe, but we got to do one more.' And he stood up and he was a little man that day. He was very brave to stand there and not flinch and let me ride down on him, because that was me and

AN

on dry land.

that was him. Regardless of anything that happens with this movie, I will always have that.”

What audiences carry away from the film is another issue. More than another recapitulation of MAD MAX nihilism, THE POSTMAN, which takes its soul as well as its storyline from the original David Brin novel, attempts to demonstrate how critical the interconnections of American cultures are to our concept of democracy, and how it all can come to ruin when those who have raised the Nietzschean ideal of the individual to a religion succeed in destroying those delicate bonds. “You’re always looking for the original story,” said Costner. “You’re always looking for something that somehow resonates with you, not necessarily what you think is going to resonate with an audience. It has to start with you. If you’re going to be in this storytelling business, then you want to try to tell a story then hasn’t been told. You’re looking for something original. I think people in their lives are looking for something original, be it an everyday experience or their work experience or their family life. I mean, we want fresh air. As a storyteller, you’re looking for that, and while this has aspects of other things that I like and other aspects of stories that I’ve enjoyed, it was told in a very original way. You almost don’t explain what you’re doing in your life other than the very simplistic idea of, ‘I liked it, and I wanted to share it.’”

“I’m really interested in what people lying in bed twenty years from now who catch this movie feel about it. I try to make the decisions for the movie based on those ideas. There are a lot of Indian cultures that make decisions based on many, many years out ahead. We’ve become a short-term cul-

ture, and I’m trying to make decisions about this movie for people twenty years from now, for thirty, for fifty years from now. It doesn’t make me right; it doesn’t mean that it’s been the right decision. But that’s the process for me.

“There is a lot more to these movies than opening weekends. There are friendships that are formed. These movies, nowadays, are kind of out of balance with what they are. They’re measured in their opening weekend, and movies are so much more than that. They live for a lifetime. I like to think of movies in those terms, and not let that weekend throw out of balance what it is I know that I’ve experienced.” □



The Postman crosses the post-apocalyptic landscape, filmed in the Pacific Northwest (above) and passes the remnants of the lost society (below).



BIBLIOFILE

By Dan Persons

STARSHIP TROOPERS—FROM NOVEL TO SCREEN Adapting and updating Robert Heinlein's fascist future.

I was reading *Starship Troopers*, and had gotten to the part where Robert Heinlein has "History and Moral Philosophy" teacher Mr. Dubois—the author's mouthpiece for explicating his vision of a fascist future—justify disciplinary, public floggings by likening criminals to disobedient dogs. I just couldn't take it anymore. Having lived through the turmoils of the '60s and the confusions and surrenders of the '70s and '80s, there were only so many buttons in me to be pushed before I cracked. And Heinlein, bless his contrarian heart, had succeeded in pushing 'em all.

Is it proof of Heinlein's genius that he can stir passions in an otherwise dispassionate reader? Or is it evidence of his short-fallings that the glitches in his presentation are so easily perceived? Mr. Dubois (who, in Ed Neumeier's screenplay, has been melded with another character, Lieutenant Jean Rasczak, and now takes that soldier's name) is, after all, a high-school teacher, addressing an assemblage of astoundingly callow youths and finding little of substance in their agonizingly naive arguments. Is Heinlein's goal to demonstrate how a fascist state will ensure the docility of its citizenry via a thorough inculcation of its youth, or does the author think

Robert Heinlein's novel presented some difficulties for the adapters.



An alien bug blows up real good in the film—the very inhumanity of the enemy made it easier for Heinlein to sell his gung-ho military attitude to readers.

that he is actually presenting a reasoned discourse in having his students challenge their teacher with nothing stronger than, "Violence never solves anything" (an exchange that Neumeier replicated in abbreviated fashion in his script)?

And how does Heinlein actually feel about this clearly fascist yet apparently quite effective society? Actor Michael Ironside has noted that it's the author's way to posit extremist futures and test their effects on the individual—the fundamentalist nightmare of *Stranger in a Strange Land* is another example—but the author has hardly gone the distance to portray a comprehensive view. From the vantage of *Starship Troopers*, the citizenry—sorry, civilians (in this world, only those who have served are fully franchised in their government)—are at the very least, well-educated, reasonably middle-class, and well-protected by their government. There's no consideration of what happens to dissidents (do you suppose the whipping post is restricted only to thieves and vandals?), no thought given to the disenfranchised—they just don't exist. Neither, for that matter, is there any need to rationalize the Other whose opposition serves to unite the populace. They're already vermin—bugs, literally—and automatically possess all the aspects that instinctively repel humans. Very convenient—no need to both-

er whipping up a lot of propaganda to convince your society that a perceived enemy are constituents of a decidedly sub-human species.

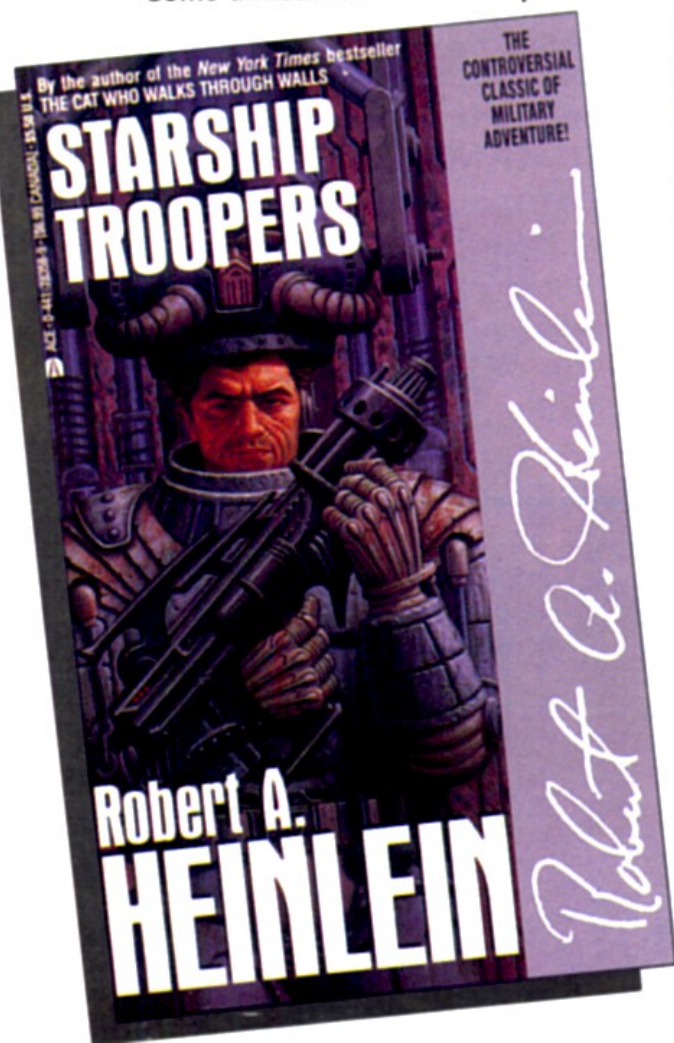
And here's the Hell of it: despite the patently rigged arguments, despite the selective focus and the convenient xenophobia, you find yourself seduced by Heinlein's notion of a world where national boundaries have been cast aside (fifteen years after WWII, Heinlein made a point of including Japanese and German recruits in his boot camp), a world where people have risen above their personal interests to fight for the common good. There's genuine excitement in Heinlein's portrayal of interplanetary warfare—the man's politics may be dodgy, but his grasp of military philosophy (all the way down to a clear understanding of the political applications of armed combat) goes a long way towards convincing a reader that this may very well be the way war is waged in the future. He is similarly meticulous in capturing the mindset of the boot soldier: Johnny Rico is flawed, naive, reflective, and wholly human—a kid who finds his calling in the Mobile Infantry and grows quite admirably into a professional soldier. The fact that Heinlein was able to invest his protagonist with full humanity only makes it more regrettable that he couldn't steel himself to portray his society with greater fidelity, if only

so Johnny's faith in his way of life could be tested as rigorously as his military skills are.

Whereas Heinlein endeavored to portray the cap trooper's mindset with a certain detachment, screenplay adapter Ed Neumeier gets in amongst the explosions and flying body parts, and dares you to follow along. This is not surprising from the man who managed to wedge existential subtexts into the heavy-metal action of *ROBOCOP*. It's fair to say that trooper Johnny Rico travels the same road that officer Alex Murphy once trod, and in a script that manages more than a few sharp observations about the tendency of humans to knuckle under to fascist chic.

Neumeier's biggest trick was to retain the elements of Robert Heinlein's novel that made it one of the bona-fide classics of science fiction literature, while grappling with the problematic political elements. It was likely easy for Heinlein, a scant fifteen years removed from a World War that united all Americans, to imagine a vast, federated army facing down a common foe. Almost two-score years later, our notions of armed conflict are less ennobled, and Neumeier has acknowledged the attitude shift by viewing Heinlein's more strident conceits through the lens of satire, including the Fed Net sequences—those fleeting interludes of breathless propaganda—but the narrative's at its caustic best in some of the less prominent moments: Johnny's offhand observation that Planet P is so dubbed because "they ran out of names;" the presentation of a "morale-booster" training video that—with a chillingly off-hand casualness—demonstrates the proper way to kill warrior bugs.

Neumeier placed great faith in the public's ability to detect satirical intent in a genre where less acute filmmakers have regularly indulged in exaggeration with zero evidence of irony. He ran a serious and (one hopes) calculated risk that those who were snowed by *INDEPENDENCE DAY*'s rah-rah attitude might take him at his word. If, at your next science-fiction convention, the hallways are flooded with troopers, it'll be proof-positive that too many of the humor-impaired were being let into the theaters. □



Verhoeven's latest over-the-top opus kicks bug!

STARSHIP TROOPERS

A Sony Pictures Entertainment release of a TriStar Pictures and Touchstone Pictures presentation of a John Davison production. Produced by John Davison, Alan Marshall. Co-producers, Phil Tippett, Ed Neumeir, Frances Doel, Stacy Lumbrazer. Directed by Paul Verhoeven. Screenplay by Ed Neumeir, based on the book by Robert A. Heinlein. Camera (Technicolor): Jost Vacano. Editors: Mark Goldblatt, Caroline Ross. Music: Basil Poledouris. MPAA Rating: R Running time 129 minutes.

Johnny Rico.....Casper Van Dien
 Dizzy Flores.....Dina Meyer
 Carmen Ibanez.....Denise Richards
 Ace Levy.....Jake Busey
 Carl Jenkins.....Neil Patrick Harris
 Sgt. Zim.....Clancy Brown

by Patricia Moir

American science fiction of the '50s had a unique flavor. After World War II, writers like Robert Heinlein indulged in a literary celebration of America's technological superiority over the forces of evil. These novels led, at least in small part, to public support for both the space program and the massive military spending of the decades to follow. *Starship Troopers* is a perfect example of this genre, filled with gee-whiz futuristic devices, unambiguous enemies, and impossibly noble men willing to die for the good of the human race.

That was exactly what I expected to see when I went to STARSHIP TROOPERS. Instead, it turned out to be the most satisfying cinematic science fiction in ages. With Ed Neumeier's clever scripting and Paul Verhoeven's superb direction, Heinlein's rather nasty neo-fascist novel becomes both a rousing action film and a satirical commentary on military psychology and xenophobic patriotism.

Verhoeven has covered similar territory. In *ROBOCOP*, glimpses



Lit by plasma fire from the enemy, the starship troopers disembark for their first battle, which leads to a rude awakening.

of the fictional news broadcasts created a context for the film's events, making the worthy point that corruption flourishes only when it is tolerated by a society as a whole. TROOPERS uses much the same techniques, but Verhoeven has taken his earlier themes even further, inviting viewers into the heart of dystopia to examine its actions and values from the inside.

In TROOPERS, the young soldiers are all so likeable, so clean-cut, so incredibly self-sacrificing, that one can't help cheering them on as they pitch themselves into

the thick of battle against the alien hordes. Sure, they're violent, ruthless, and unreflective, but so what? They're the good guys, aren't they? The evil aliens deserve to die; besides, with all those special effects up on that big screen, those bugs blow up reeal good. By the time this movie was over, I kind of felt like killing a few bugs myself.

And therein lies this film's real genius, for TROOPERS first invites us to sympathize with its characters' actions and then proceeds to reveal their fascist roots. What appear, at the outset, to be isolated examples of excessive militaristic enthusiasm—a high school teacher's belief in violence as the source of ultimate authority, a sport which appears to be a psychotically mutated form of high school football—are gradually shown to be individual manifestations of a social order in which justice is summarily dispensed and punishment, from flogging to execution, publicly enjoyed. Those who support the system—the "citizens"—are the governing elite, while everyone else—"civilians"—are barred from public office and must seek permission to have children. The parallels with Nazi Germany are sometimes obvious: the soldiers' uniforms resemble those of the SS, and the military rallies recall TRIUMPH

OF THE WILL. There are, however, more subtle (and more disturbing) parallels. Children are raised to hold an unreasoned hatred against alien species; dissent is drowned in mob hysteria; and sadistic torture is indulged with the excuse that it will further knowledge and result in the defeat of the enemy. When a lone reporter suggests that the bugs' aggression might be a justifiable reaction to the Federation's imperialist expansion into their natural habitat, he is assailed by angry troopers eager to avenge Earth's losses, but the scene plants a seed of doubt. Is it possible that the aliens have only been defending themselves?

TROOPERS goes a long way toward explaining something that has been the subject of many films: how can masses of people unquestioningly support morally questionable causes? Verhoeven—with stirring rhetoric, rationalizations, and attractive, youthful examples of noble idealism—shows us just how appealing mass movements can be, regardless of their underlying values. I found myself simultaneously swept up in the film and dismayed at my own willingness to be so. STARSHIP TROOPERS turned out to be not only a rousing entertainment but also a sobering and thoughtful experience. □

For all the talk of human individuals versus insect swarms, the troopers are most effective when fighting in groups against isolated bug individuals.



An effective evocation of allegorical evil

THE DEVIL'S ADVOCATE

A Warner Bros. release presented in association with Regency Enterprises of a Kopelson Entertainment production. Produced by Arnold Kopelson, Anne Kopelson, Arnon Milchan. Executive producers: Taylor Hackford, Michael Tadmor, Erwin Stoff Barry Bernardi, Steve White. Co-producer: Stephen Brown. Directed by: Taylor Hackford. Screenplay: Jonathan Lemkin, Tony Gilroy, based on the novel by Andrew Neiderman. Camera (Technicolor, Panavision widescreen): Andrzej Barkowiak. Editor: Mark Warner. Music: James Newton Howard. Production design: Bruno Rubeo. Set Decoration: Roberta Holinko. MPAA Rating: R. Running time: 144 min.

Kevin Lomax.....	Keanu Reeves
John Milton.....	Al Pacino
Mary Ann Lomax.....	Charlize Theron
Eddie Barzoon.....	Jeffrey Jones
Mrs. Lomax.....	Judith Ivey
Christabella.....	Connie Nielsen
Alexander Cullen.....	Craig T. Nelson
Jackie Heath.....	Tamara Tunie
Leamon Heath.....	Ruben Santiago-Hudson
Pam Garrety.....	Debra Monk
Weaver.....	Vyto Ruginis
Melissa Black.....	Laura Harrington
Diana Barzoon.....	Pamela Gray

by Patricia Moir

The American dream—the possibility of unlimited success regardless of one's origins—has inspired a series of films over the years warning of the potential consequences of ill-gotten or badly-used power and wealth. The moral, always, is that absolute power corrupts absolutely. *THE DEVIL'S ADVOCATE*, superficially a horror film, works best when viewed as an allegory in this cautionary sub-genre: take a small-town boy with big-time ambitions, raise him in the competing American traditions of Christian morality and cutthroat materialism, hand him the opportunity to achieve fantastic wealth and fame, and watch as his ideals deteriorate.

Keanu Reeves is Kevin Lomax, a gifted but unscrupulous defense attorney who attracts the attention of John Milton (Al Pacino), the



Al Pacino and Keanu Reeves star in the excellent *THE DEVIL'S ADVOCATE*.

head of a prestigious New York law firm. Wooed with the promise of luxury living, huge pay cheques, and an international reputation, Lomax and his wife, Mary Ann (Charlize Theron), pack their bags and relocate in the big city. There, they are greeted with apparently friendly envy by the firm's partners and their wives, and with fatherly concern by Milton himself. The problem is, swimming with sharks can be dangerous for these small fry. While Kevin struggles to swallow his scruples in order to defend the firm's morally questionable clientele, Mary Ann quickly finds herself drowning in the midst of the predators. Kevin's ambitions blind him to what rapidly becomes obvious to both Mary Ann and the audience: the firm of Milton, Chadwick, and Waters is merely a facade concealing a darker, supernatural will to foster evil and chaos in the world. Milton is the Prince of Lies himself, and Kevin finds that the battle with his conscience is really a battle for his soul, and perhaps for the future of the world itself.

Left: Pacino's John Milton blows his cool in the climax. Right: Milton introduces Kevin (Reeves) to his demonic half sister (Connie Nielsen).

Ann and his skillful deception of Kevin are masterpieces of low-key acting, and infinitely more horrible than the film's openly supernatural scenes. When he skillfully dispatches a couple of subway muggers with a few well-chosen words (while Kevin watches uncomprehendingly), we see not only the devil's power, but the ugly pleasure he takes in causing a little offhanded destruction; Milton may have bigger plans to attend to, but he's not above a little recreational evil whenever the chance arises.

Reeves, whose best performances up to this point have been as half-witted teenagers, does a surprisingly credible job of portraying Lomax's gradually dawning awareness of the horrors closing in on him. There are inconsistencies (Reeves should probably avoid parts that require any sort of accent), but they are negligible. At 33, Reeves is maturing into the sort of classically American, Gary Cooper handsomeness that hasn't been popular since the '50s; it's a look that sets him apart from all the other '90s faces. Unlike the film icons of an earlier era, however, he's not afraid of looking ugly; watch him carefully during his final scene with Mary Ann, who has been driven to madness and self-destruction by Milton and his accomplices. Terror and grief are not pretty emotions, and there's not a hint of cinematic cliché in Reeves' portrayal of them. Theron is likewise convincing in a difficult role which requires her to transform from bubbly young optimist to wretchedly insane victim in the space of a few scenes.

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THE DEVIL'S ADVOCATES: Director Taylor Hackford and stars Keanu Reeves and Charlize Theron.

By Frederick C. Szebin

Although Taylor Hackford (AN OFFICER AND A GENTLEMAN) had previously directed a Stephen King adaptation (DELORES CLAIBORN), THE DEVIL'S ADVOCATE actually offered him his first foray into horror. "I haven't done horror movies in the past," he said. "This script at Warner Brothers had been around for eight years. It was a special effects-laden, let's-scare-'em type of film. But I also saw at the core something that was very provocative for this particular point in time: we're reaching the end of a millennium, and when that happens there's a great deal of uncertainty. You look back at the past, and you look toward the future: will we have a future; will there be another 1000 years? That process of evaluating who we are and where we are is a very basic core on which to present a Faustian tale.

"Right now, the legal profession, more than any other, controls our society. Lawyers populate all three branches of our government: the Presidency, the Legislative Congress, and the Judiciary," Hackford continued. "I think our legal system is the best there is, and the fact that everybody deserves representation is wonderful. On the other hand, in our society you deserve representation, but what

Kevin's wife (Charlize Theron) finds herself unable to compete against seductive evil for Kevin's attention.



In one of the film's many striking images, Milton gives Kevin a sky-high view of the city, full of "potential clients."

is the quality of that representation? And that has to do with how much money you have. If you're a big corporation, you can afford great lawyers who can get you through situations even if you are guilty of infractions. And any profession that canonizes freeing of the guilty is open for criticism."

During the years the script had been floating around, it had been turned down by the two actors who eventually starred in it: Al Pacino and Keanu Reeves. Hackford decided to make the film, but only after doing a total rewrite with DELORES CLAIBORN scribe Tony Gilroy. When the director sent the new version out, Reeves jumped ship from SPEED II to take the role. "It was the sequel to the biggest movie of the previous year," said Hackford, "and he was being paid a lot more money than he was on this movie. He made a choice not to go into the action genre, and to prove he's an actor, and this is a very strong role. The part of Kevin Lomax is something he's never played before—this is a brilliant, driven trial attorney who is most comfortable when he's in the court room. He's voraciously vicious and articulate.

"Keanu, at this point, has done a lot of different roles—teenagers and slackers and various other things—but not this one yet. So it was a big challenge for him, and his turning down a role in what was possibly the biggest film of the year to do this showed me a lot. It was a risk for him, and he

jumped into this with both feet flying. He's effectively having to prove himself. I gave him the tools; I set him up with the top criminal attorneys in the country, really smart, very tough individuals who will look at him with a jaundiced eye. And he had to go toe to toe with them. He did his research, preparing himself physically and mentally."

When Reeves read the script, he was immediately caught by the tone of the dialogue. "Tony Gilroy has a real visceral energy. It's not obvious. It's sophisticated. And I liked the themes: the ethical and moral conflict; the arguments about Heaven and Hell; and the state of the world. It was fun. I really liked the emotional range Kevin Lomax goes through."

Reeves added, "Kevin Lomax can manipulate a situation...he can get into a truth and present it in a way that it will override another truth. As a defense attorney you have to sometimes—maybe not distort, but tell another truth, or to prove the real truth. I think Kevin is really good at that. He's got a great imagination and a knack to look inside of people to see why they do what they do, who they are; he knows how to get what he wants from them."

Such an amoral stance made the attorney perfect fodder for Pacino's John Milton, a powerful corporate lawyer whose fingers reach into numerous unsavory pies, including the seduction of souls such as Lomax's. Having turned down the role the first four

times it was offered to him, the legendary actor had to be swayed by Hackford. "I had to convince him that this was a role worthy of his talent," said Hackford. "At first he said, 'So what?' I told him that every great actor plays this role at one degree or another. It's a classic role. What I want to do is design this role, the character of John Milton, which is a little conceit to the author of PARADISE LOST. The character in our film is an incredibly powerful international force. I want to create that character in not just a fantasy; I want to make that character synonymous with all the personality attributes of Al Pacino—really smart, charming and seductive, but at the same time he's got his feet down on the street. He's not a guy born with a silver spoon in his mouth. He's from the streets, and you can feel it. He's a very provocative, unpredictable character. And if the devil can't be seductive, then he's not worth his salt."

Along with the star power of Pacino and Reeves came relative newcomer Charlize Theron (TWO DAYS IN THE VALLEY), as Lomax's wife Mary Ann. Mary Ann is the story's conscience and heart, a crucial character whose decent into madness is a key part to the film's emotional impact. "I remember reading the script," said the 22-year-old actress, "and her character description—usually they spend a lot of time on that in a script—was just 'We meet Mary Ann Lomax, and we love her.' I read the script, and I

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BORDERLAND

By Anthony P. Montesano

RETURN OF THE SLASHER PICK

Cliches replay like something new

By the late 1980s, the slasher genre had run out of blood. It had its roots in Alfred Hitchcock's *PSYCHO* (1960) and really got going with the release of John Carpenter's *HALLOWEEN* (1978) and *FRIDAY THE 13TH* (1980). But endless sequels and ripoffs (*PROM NIGHT*, *APRIL FOOL'S DAY*, etc) churned out all-too-familiar stories, offering nothing fresh or innovative. By the 1990s, the sub-genre had all but died and was regulated to direct-to-video trash.

In 1996, *SCREAM*—in which director Wes Craven and screenwriter Kevin Williamson took a smart, tongue-in-cheek look at the form—changed all that and gave the genre its first \$100 million hit. Following on the heels of that crossover success, Williamson has teamed with director Jim Gillespie and mined a Lois Duncan novel to create *I KNOW WHAT YOU DID LAST SUMMER* (Columbia, 10/97, 100 mins, R). Duncan, the R.L. Stine of her day, wrote the book as a thriller for a young adult audience. In fact, minus the blood and guts, *I KNOW WHAT YOU DID LAST SUMMER* could easily be a Hardy Boys/Nancy Drew mystery. What makes this film special is the way it injects an energy long missing in the genre. Tracing back roots to the Marion Crane character in *PSYCHO*, the would-be victims here have committed a grave crime (in this case,

SEVEN's Morgan Freeman lends his credibility to *KISS THE GIRLS*, a well-made but derivative psycho-thriller.



I KNOW WHAT YOU DID LAST SUMMER: Four teens (Freddie Prinze, Jr., Jennifer Love Hewitt, Sarah Michelle Gellar, and Ryan Phillippe) cover up an auto accident.

a murder to cover up an auto accident) and are being repaid in a particularly grizzly fashion (systematically being hunted down and killed by a guy with a hook). The stage is set late one night on the sands of a deserted beach as the main characters trade on their knowledge of an urban myth which involves a killer with a hook for a hand. The audience is being clued in early, and when the mayhem begins, one can't help thinking back to the story on the beach. It's just these sorts of touches which elevate the film above the dreck that has come to define the genre of late.

I don't mean to suggest that *I KNOW WHAT YOU DID LAST SUMMER* has rewritten the genre for all generations to follow. Far from that. It also falls prey to many of the conventions that have become part of the slasher cycle (staging a seemingly unrelated killing early on just to get the body count going, introducing red herrings involving some strange characters, etc).

While all slasher films are really about shock, few possess the level of intelligence this film does. *I KNOW WHAT YOU DID LAST SUMMER* succeeds, like *SCREAM* before it, by embracing core conventions while comment-

ing on them in a way that makes them palatable for a larger audience. For example, when two of the teenagers involved in the cover-up approach a creepy house, one character references Jodie Foster as doing the same thing in *THE SILENCE OF THE LAMBS* only to meet up with a psycho.

I happily admit that the ending of this film made me jump out of my seat. And it was great to be affected that way. I can't remember the last time a slasher film has provoked that response from me. If anything killed the slasher films, it was the fact that they relied on a core audience and then alienated that same audience by boring them to death. The difference between *I KNOW WHAT YOU DID LAST SUMMER* and a film like *PROM NIGHT* is not the content (the two films share surprising similarities); it's the execution and the character development.

Before the killings even begin in *I KNOW WHAT YOU DID LAST SUMMER*, the film essays how the crime has psychologically affected the group which perpetrated it (an overbearing sense of guilt and the loss of their life's ambition plague them). Compare that with the carloads of one-dimensional teenagers sent to their doom at Camp Crystal Lake. The biggest

crisis any of those teenagers faced was whether or not they were going to get laid. *I KNOW WHAT YOU DID LAST SUMMER* also boasts a cast of fresh young actors, including Sarah Michelle Gellar (TV's *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*) and the engaging Jennifer Love Hewitt, a regular on the Fox TV teenager hit *PARTY OF FIVE*. The mix here works to maximum effect, creating audience anticipation and delivering on promised shocks. One cop out: just before the final shocker, the screenplay exonerates the remaining characters of their heretofore mentioned guilt in a way that is meant to be cathartic but ends up being irresponsible.

Completely derivative of everything from *SILENCE OF THE LAMBS* and *SEVEN* to *PHANTOM OF THE OPERA* and *PSYCHO*, *KISS THE GIRLS* (Paramount, 9/97, 117 mins, R) is a perfectly adequate but totally unnecessary film. Ashley Judd, as a would-be victim who escapes the psycho's dungeon, continues to prove she has a dazzling film presence and the makings of a real movie star.

As directed by Gary Fleder, the film, based on the novel by James Petterson, tells the twisted tale of a loner who "collects" beautiful young women in his search for "love." With his niece as one of the kidnap victims, Morgan Freeman's forensic psychologist has a personal stake in the investigation, which kicks into high gear when he teams with Judd. After the box office successes of *SEVEN* and *KISS THE GIRLS*, one begins to wonder if Freeman will be typecast as the modern-day psycho hunter. The film's southern backwoods setting evokes the appropriate mood and pacing. A bit annoying is the over-produced sound design which underscores even the slightest movements with overwrought blares of noise.

In such a well-worn genre, one hopes for more than *KISS THE GIRLS* delivers. Unlike *I KNOW WHAT YOU DID LAST SUMMER*, the run-of-the-mill *KISS THE GIRLS* does not offer that extra sense of energy. □

Evokes fond memories of sci-fi sub-classics.

STAR KID

A Trimark presentation of a Jennie Lew Tugend/Trimark Pictures production. Producer: Jennie Lew Tugend. Executive producer: Mark Amin. Director: Manny Coto. Cinematographer: Ronn Schmidt. Editor: Bob Ducsay. Production designer: C.J. Strawn. Visual effects supervisor: Thomas C. Rainone. Special effects supervisor: Lou Carlucci. Special makeup effects created at the Burman Studio, Inc., Thomas R. Burman & Bari Dreiband-Burman. Creature animatronics created at Criswell Prod. Costumes, Heane Meltzer. Supervising music producer, Spencer Proffer. Original music by Nicholas Pike. Screenplay by Manny Coto. 10/97, 101 mins, PG.

Spencer Griffith.....Joseph Mazzello
Turbo Bruntley.....Joey Simmrin
Cybersuit.....Alex Daniels
Cybersuit Voice.....Arthur Burghardt
Broodwarrior.....Brian Simpson
Roland Griffith.....Richard Gilliland
Janet Holloway.....Corinne Bohrer

by Steve Biodrowski

Kids' fantasy movies can be either well-meaningly wrong-headed (FAIRY TALE: A TRUE STORY) or colossally stupid (ROCKETMAN), so it is with a great deal of trepidation that an adult viewer approaches STAR KID (filmed as THE WARRIOR OF WAVERLY STREET). Surprisingly, however, the film turns out to be a pleasant diversion that should appeal marvelously well to its target audience (young boys), while amusing their parents. This film is no fantasy classic, but it admirably succeeds at fulfilling its modest ambition—which is to craft a juvenile fantasy in which the effects and action are good enough to withstand adult scrutiny. The result is a film that, without descending into camp, manages to evoke your best memories of those monster flicks you loved as a kid—which you continue to regard with fond nostalgia, even though you now realize how awful they are. Fortunately, this film is less like those old sub-classics than it is like your *memories* of them. Which is to say, you aren't going to see a zipper up the back, a jiggly matte line, or anything else that will destroy your enjoyment.

The plot is pretty basic, and the film gets off to a not-too-promising start: as a heavy-handed narrator declaims in the background, we see too-cute aliens engaged in a life-or-death struggle with invaders. They've been building a proto-type weapon to turn the tide of battle, but when it looks as if it might fall in alien hands, they jettison it into outer space.

Conveniently, it practically falls into the lap of Spencer Griffith (Joseph Mazzello), the new kid in town who is being persecuted by



Joseph Mazzello (inset) plays a young boy who dons an alien suit (above) in the amusing STAR KID.

Turbo (Joey Simmrin), the local bully. The computerized cybersuit, which talks and thinks for itself but needs a biological unit to actually engage in battle, invites Spencer to suit up. After turning the tables on Turbo, Spencer finds that he cannot exit the suit until he has completed its field test—which is to engage the enemy in battle. Needless to say, the alien enemy appears, trying to track down the cybersuit for its own purposes.

The simple story benefits from its condensed time frame (which takes place over a single 24-hour period), and the appealing cast manage to pull off the obligatory plot elements with charm rather than undue sentimentality (Spencer not only teams up with his former nemesis, Turbo; he also fixes his widowed father up with his beautiful science teacher, and he learns how to use power responsibly).

But what really sells this movie is the cybersuit (affectionately known as "Cy" in the movie). The excellent work by Thomas R. Burman and Bari Dreiband-Burman

brings the sentient prototype to believable life with wonderfully articulate facial expressions that seem utterly natural, not like the product of film technology. Kudos also go to Alex Daniels, the man inside the suit, who conveys not only power and agility, but also uses his body language to remind us, subtly and not so subtly, that there is supposed to be a twelve-year-old boy operating inside.

Despite monsters and effects that make POWER RANGERS look like amateur night, this is still a light-hearted film. The sense of menace never seems very strong (except perhaps to very young viewers). Nevertheless, the action is handled with aplomb, generating some genuine, fun-filled excitement. The climactic battle between Cy and an alien monster is everything one could hope for. Just imagine TERMINATOR vs PREDATOR, with tongue ever so slightly in cheek, and remember: just because you can't take it seriously doesn't mean it isn't fun. □

FILM RATINGS

- Must see
- Excellent
- Good
- Mediocre
- Fodder for MST-3K

HABIT

Director-writer: Larry Fessenden. Glass Eye Pix, 10/97. 112 mins. Not rated. With: Larry Fessenden, Meredith Snaider, Aaron Beall, Patricia Coleman, Heather Woodbury.

Eroticism that successfully usurps the prominent place of requisite violence in vampire films is rare these days—it's rare in any film, actually. It is one of the welcome and unexpected pleasures of HABIT, Larry Fessenden's independently-made horror film. HABIT is the story of a young New Yorker, Sam (Fessenden), who manages a restaurant and bar by day and parties on the town by night. On Halloween, he goes to a party and meets the mysterious and alluring Ana. So far, the film plays like a rough realistic drama on the gritty streets of New York—more MEAN STREETS than INTERVIEW WITH A VAMPIRE. Half of the appeal is that it evokes such a convincing reality—the overt hocus pocus is limited to a couple dream sequences which may be more a matter of the Sam's strung-out state of mind than any kind of supernatural revelation.

No one is particularly surprised that Sam is drunk by the time he gets to the party—he frequently is. Sam is also on the rebound. Liza, his artist girlfriend, has just moved out; at least partly because of Sam's drinking. This is more about honest urban angst than Count Dracula. Sam leaves the party with Ana only to have her disappear when he goes back for his coat. She reappears a few nights later, and she and Sam end up in the park where Ana seduces him, first biting his lip (fore-play?) and sucking just "a little bit at a time," and then, much to his pleasure, she jerks him off. He passes out and wakes up alone in the morning. He's hooked. Its downhill from there; not even his friends can help him.

HABIT cleverly takes our collective knowledge of vampires and weaves it subliminally into the film. The familiar paraphernalia is there: the blood sucking, the creatures only appearing at night, the mirrors, the garlic. But they are just ordinary accoutrements really, if you think about it—they can be explained: even the blood-sucking, Sam's friend speculates, is more about Sam's particular sexual proclivity than vampires. Even Sam's obviously declining health seems more a matter for rehab clinic than the result of supernatural predation.

Fessenden gives an honest, unself-conscious performance as the moral yet flawed center of his film. He surrounds himself with a dynamic ensemble cast, and his female characters are as credible as their male counterparts. HABIT is a smart story of humans and vampires—a film aspiring to the sublime. Fessenden won the 1997 Independent Spirit "Someone to Watch Award." I'll do just that. ●●● Sonya Burres

THE STICKY FINGERS OF TIME

Director: Hilary Brougher. Good Machine-Crystal Pictures. Screened at the Toronto Film Festival, 9/97. 90 mins. With: Nicole Zaray, Terumi Matthews, Belinda Becker.

Shot in color (for present-day scenes) and black-and-white (for the 1950s), the film traces the unknown relationship between two women, one an author in the early '50s, the other a younger woman who is giving up her aspirations to write. Author Tucker Harding was just beginning her new novel *The Sticky Fingers of Time*, when her roommate, a black woman who was living in the rented house when she returned from a trip, comes in. They are bisexual and having a relationship with each other as well as with the same man, Isaac. Tucker doesn't realize that Isaac is a time-traveller, until she is mysteriously transported into 1997. There she meets Drew, who has found an old, battered copy of the book that Tucker was only beginning to write when she left her time. As a journalist covering H-Bomb tests in the 1950s, Tucker was exposed to radiation and subsequently was able to travel in time without knowing it. In the interweaving plot lines that follow, the film speculates about whether or not one person (Drew, the young writer) can change an unpleasant future. The five fingers of time are said to be the past, the present, the future, what might have been, and what could be. Drew has shown Tucker a newspaper clipping that was in the book, reporting Harding's murder by gunshot. Drew resolves to fight against the unsavory characters who want to keep the future the way it is, and attempts to save Tucker Harding's life.

Similarities between this film and Terry Gilliam's *TWELVE MONKEYS* will surely be noticed: both films deal with non-linear time travel. Yet Gilliam deliberately left the ending of his film open to interpretation by leaving certain plot points ambiguous. Hilary Brougher is meticulous in the way she ties up every last loose end in her story. All the women are sensual and intelligent; and their performances are first-rate. My only complaint was Tucker's lack of reaction at her unexpected arrival in 1997. She walks around in a daze but doesn't register the terror or mental anguish that anyone would experience in her situation. The cinematography by Ethan Mass is gorgeous. Along with the intriguing story, there are touches of subtle, unexpected humour and apocalyptic overtones which recalled Nicolas Roeg's *IN SIGNIFICANCE*. Hopefully, this excellent genre film will reach a wide enough audience to allow Brougher to make more films; if this, her debut, is any indication, there are great things to come.

●●●● Paul Wardle

DIRECT-TO-VIDEO

THE COMPANION

Director: Gary Fleder. MCA/Universal Home Video, 8/96. 94 mins. With: Kathryn Harrold, Bruce Greenwood, Brion James, Joely Fischer, James Karen, Talia Balsam.

"Do androids dream of electric love?" is the question asked by this above-average, direct-to-video effort, directed in 1996 by Gary Fleder, who went on to score a substantial hit with *KISS THE GIRLS* last year. The story follows best-selling CD-Rom romance writer Gillian Tanner (Harrold) who leaves her cheating boyfriend and flees to the countryside to write, with Geoffrey (Greenwood), an android companion. Geoffrey proves adept at cooking and cleaning, but Gillian longs for something more and adjusts his programming in order to reconfigure him into her perfect partner: strong but compassionate; rough but gentle; reliable but unpredictable in a spontaneous sort of way; opinionated but never belligerent; proud but not arrogant; romantic, sensual, and of course



Based loosely on the Malibu Comics character, NIGHTMAN lives up to the standard producer Glen Larson set with *BJ AND THE BEAR*.

completely monogamous.

The companion mentally short-circuits in attempting to live up to all the contradictions implied, growing protective of his mistress in the fashion of the Jack Williamson classic "With Folded Hands," coupled with some of 2001's HAL's more enthusiastic proclivities. Although the story is set in 2015, the main location is a "quaint 20th century mountain cabin" to keep the budget from breaking. Fleder doesn't generate many thrills, but the intelligence of Ian Seeborg's script holds viewer interest. ●● Dennis Fischer

2103: DEADLY WAKE

Director: G. Philip Jackson. PNA Incorporated. 100 mins. With: Malcolm McDowell, Michael Pare, Heidi Von Palleske, Gwyneth Walsh.

2103: THE DEADLY WAKE is somewhat less successful than PNA's previous effort, *THE CUSP*. Telling the story of an attempt to secretly sink a ship and its cargo of deadly waste without the crew's knowledge, this otherwise stalwart effort lags in spots. Partially this is due to the action being set on a lumbering cargo ship. Instead of lively visuals, we have repetitive miniatures of a large ship cutting water. Additionally, the attempt to introduce a feminine Terminator-style character in the film's last third does not pan out.

However, the film does have an effective plot and set-up and splendid acting by Malcolm McDowell and the rest of the cast. The bridge of the ship is a very interesting place, with Baby—an 86-year-old fetus being used as wetware in the ship's control systems—an interesting addition.

This is not an awful film by any means, but it could have been even better. ●● Chuck Wagner

ANIME

CRUSHER JOE: THE MOVIE

Director: Yasuhiko Yoshikazu. AnimEigo, 10/97 (1983). 125 mins. Voices: Michael Brady, Juliet Cesario, Dave Underwood.

From out of the depths of 1983 comes the exuberant and rather silly *CRUSHER JOE: THE MOVIE*, an sf anime extravaganza, complete with deep-space warfare, exploding cities, giant robots, effete villains, slaving monsters, a missing heiress (in a cryogenic sarcophagus!), and everybody's favorite: the ball-cut-

ting bitch with a whip. The aroma of *STAR WARS*, *YAMATO*, and *MACROSS* hangs all over this effort, wherein Joe—that's it, just Joe—and his interplanetary, trouble-shooting Crusher team have to put to right a botched rescue mission, but director Yoshikazu seems so hell-bent on delivering on the goods that it's hard to fault him for what he borrows from other sources. Features a looser, more cartoon-like animation style than we've seen post-*AKIRA*, and much cowering and smirking on the part of the female leads (*GHOST IN THE SHELL* this ain't). Pure fun—the disco riot has to be seen to be believed.

●● Dan Persons

MADE-FOR-TELEVISION

CLONED

Director: Douglas Barr. Writers: Carmen Culver and David Taylor; story by Culver and Perri Klass. NBC-TV, 9/97. 2 hrs. w/ commercials. With: Elizabeth Perkins, Bradley Whitford, Alan Rosenberg.

Headlines and paranoia yet again inspires NBC, as they did with the awful *ASTER-ROID* to go SF with this paint by the numbers TV movie that seems to have been thrown together after the filmmakers glanced at CNN's headlines concerning clones, prefab organs and corporate conspiracy. In this story, Skye Weston (Perkins) has yet to get over the death of her eight year old son Chris when she discovers that the very laboratory she works for had cloned him twelve times over for various hopeful parents around the country. Not only that, the dinkering docs

also took a bit of his tissue to create an organ farm that would make them rich beyond their wildest dreams. Feeling betrayed at the lack of moral ethics involved in stealing her son's tissues, let alone making more of him for other parents, Weston goes on a private crusade to reveal the scientists for the self-proclaiming gods they are.

Everyone in the cast is uniformly excellent, particularly Enrico Colantoni as a traitorous FBI man, but they all give more than the material—at least as it is presented in this quickie flick—more than it's worth. There is some speechifying and moralizing on the subject of human cloning and organ harvesting, but it is over with quickly enough as the picture stumbles into a silly foot chase through the woods and a cliched confrontation at the head scientist's award ceremony. There is some fine camera work to heighten the suspense of a particular moment, but that is the only home for suspense in the overall production, which lays there with its limp dialogue, simplistic world view and simply boring presentation. *COMA* from 1977 offered much more suspense and human drama on similar subject matter, which this piece of forgettable fluff wouldn't touch lest it should, heaven forbid, present the frighteningly real potential of such a story on a dramatic level above high school drama.

●● Frederick C. Szebin

NIGHT MAN

Director: Nick Daniel. Teleplay by Glen A. Larson, based on the Malibu Comics character. Syndicated 9/97. 2 hrs. w/commercials. With: Matt McCoy, Earl Holliman, Derek Webster, Taylor Dane.

Glen A. Larson continues to live up to the expectations he set with such televised fare as *B.J. AND THE BEAR*, *BATTLESTAR GALACTICA* and *THE HIGHWAYMAN* through this latest of his efforts, a dull, uninvolved superhero series that lays there like so much rubber suiting.

Based loosely on the Malibu Comics character, saxophone player and martial arts expert Johnny Domino has his life changed when he accidentally becomes involved with a plot to sell prototype high-tech weaponry in the form of a bullet proof suit, an anti-gravity belt, stealth technology involving a billowing cape and a laser beam eye to "this country's

enemies," as the script puts it. The patriot engineers who try to keep the weaponry from the baddies are picked off one by one until the last one left alive (Webster) introduces Domino to the suit and its neat potential to kick U.S. enemy butt. Along for the ride is Domino's ex-cop dad (Holliman) who, despite his background, never really seems to catch on. And to add to Domino's abilities, he is struck by lightning—really—which jump starts that unused portion of the human brain that allows him to read nasty bad-guy thoughts. "You're in tune to the frequency of evil," says poor Patrick Macnee in a useless supporting role that makes me feel for the old boy.

Director Daniel grinds out Larson's script into rather dull visuals and less-than-special effects. Singer Dane won't have her phone ringing from her work in this thing, but at least Holliman is kept busy. (Always liked Holliman.) This pilot doesn't set much hope for the forthcoming syndicated series, although *BABYLON 5* also started slow out of the gate. Can't hope against hope that Larson will imbue *NIGHTMAN* with that SF epic's class. Even Holliman can't do that.

● Frederick C. Szebin

TOOTHLESS

Director: Melanie Mayron. Writer: Mark S. Kaufman. ABC-TV, 10/97. 2 hrs, w/commercials. With: Kristie Alley, Dale Midkiff, Lynn Redgrave, Melanie Mayron.

Alley is Catherine, a lovely, available, yet emotionally-detached dentist whose whole life revolved around her job until she's run over by a bike messenger and winds up in Limbo. In that desert-bound trailer park she does community service as the tooth fairy as her time on Earth is judged. A key to the job is not to interact with mortals, but once those words are uttered you know will all certainty that Catherine will soon be giving advice to young Bobby, a simple action that quickly dovetails into him convincing other kids of the tooth fairy's existence, which follows a rash of tooth pulling so that she becomes a secret tutor, confidant, coach and friend.

This TV movie is old-fashioned to the nth degree even including a montage with an image of Alley superimposed over various world sites as she does her job. But old fashioned is not necessarily a bad thing. Amusing, particularly when Alley as the tooth fairy bitches out the Easter Bunny for spreading chocolate Easter eggs around, the picture serves as a charming vehicle for its lovely and comically talented star. Without Alley, this would be intolerable fluff, but she finds fun in the material, which makes her fun to watch. Director/actress Mayron keeps things light, sweet and moving well. Young children can enjoy Alley's little tantrums in her ridiculous dress, while adults can share the smile with their kids in what is truly a family movie, one meant to be enjoyed together. A very sweet film with a better message for children to hear than what is usually offered to them.

●●● Frederick C. Szebin

THE WATCHER

By Frederick C. Szebin

Hollywood, more than any other industry, freely recycles its wares, but those producers, directors, writers, and actors who recycle the most are given little recognition outside their own industry. Reuse is the order of the day, but is Hollywood up for any Presidential honors? I think not.

Among the Biz's best re-users are the producer-director team of Dean Devlin and Roland Emmerich. Genre clichés are pumped up with finesse, dressed in style, repainted with contemporary technology, and served up on silver-plated platters. Since their epics *STARGATE* and *INDEPENDENCE DAY* did so well with their revitalized material, television came a-calling and began recycling their recycle material.

First, Showtime—without the cooperation of Devlin and Emmerich—adapted *STARGATE* into *STARGATE SG1*, using the original theatrical film as a springboard for their own feature-length pilot and one-hour series continuing the adventures of Colonel Jack O'Neil and his galaxy-hopping team. Richard Dean Anderson (*MACGIVER*) takes over the role created by Kurt Russell, with Michael Shanks doing an incredible James Spader as scientist Daniel Jackson, and newcomers Christopher Judge as the alien Teal'c, and Amanda Tapping as Captain Samantha Carter.

The original feature was "expanded" with previously unseen footage adding up to about five

STARGATE SG1, THE VISITOR Recycling Sci-Fi for TV.



The 2-hour pilot for *STARGATE SG1* (with Christopher Judge and Amanda Tapping, above) got off to a slow start, but the series episodes improved.

minutes. The first difference in the expanded edition is the inclusion of opening footage that was originally (and still is) shown in flashback—of Jaye Davidson as the young boy who walks toward the light from heaven and is absorbed by the alien being that will become known as Ra. Like much of the rest of the added footage, it proves to be superfluous.

In the new version, we get a shot of a fossilized guard's bird-like helmet, a stark image that is repeated later as Russell's Col. O'Neil views the very same fossil before entering the stargate. The military, it seems, has at least an idea of the alien territory they are

exploring in the extended version, but the footage is so quick that it adds little to the narrative.

Most of the new footage is snippets: bits of dialogue or scenes already included. There is only one sequence that actually serves the picture: as the sand storm begins, the soldiers are closed within the alien settlement and, in the original cut, don't seem to have a problem with the fact that the only exit to a mysterious, potentially-dangerous city is being slammed behind them. In the new version we get more showing how the marines draw guns, fire to clear the area around them, and hold a hostage until they are sure that no funny stuff is going on. Russell is taken to the parapet to see the oncoming storm, at which point, they relax and the film picks up at the meal as in the original cut.

STARGATE is, despite its well-grounded foundation in SF cliché, quite a well-done and exciting film, with fine performances from everyone involved, especially the supporting cast. Nothing is lost and nothing is gained from the extended version, and maybe that's the best we can hope for from an industry that continues to restructure works that were considered finished in the first place. As an introduction into the *STARGATE: SG-1* series, the feature-length pilot doesn't fare as well. During this prologue to the weeks to come, we learn that the President



James Spader is harassed by Jaye Davison in the *STARGATE* feature, which Showtime ran in an expanded version before launching their TV series.

has decreed that the gate be used to contact other civilizations to determine their threat or peaceful intentions. A titanium iris is added to the gate to shut out any uninvited, heavily-armed guests, and SG-1 goes week to week, from world to world to find out what is out there.

For their first adventure, the answer is, 'More of the same'. O'Neil returns to the world of his first visit when aliens in cobra-headed war gear kill marines guarding the gate and kidnap a woman soldier. It turns out that the same race that spawned the feature's evil Ra is still out there, looking for the chosen few that will carry their god-parasites.

Unfortunately for the pilot, the Canadian pines hardly make for an appropriate alien landscape, and certainly don't make sense for the hostiles' use of cobra imagery. The last twenty minutes pick up nicely as the marines try to get survivors through the gate as a countdown for a lock of its services is started on Earth. A parasite enters the character of Kowalski, another carryover from the feature, and the pilot ends with his eyes glowing eerily.

This leads to the series, which (like *BABYLON 5* before it) does much better as it develops week to week. In the first episode, Kowalski cannot be saved from the parasite. In another show, Capt. Carter is taken by a Mongol-like hoard who consider their women possessions, and there is no real need to develop this narrative further because we've seen it before. The series fares better with "Cold Lazarus," which involves a crystalline life form that can mimic what it comes into contact with; only that contact is painful and can cause death. O'Neil is left behind on that world as his double comes to Earth in a search for the Colonel's dead son that leads him to O'Neil's ex-wife, just as the real Colonel comes back through the gate. It's a sweet and heart-bending episode, in which this mimic isn't the typical body snatcher but a being with a purpose—to heal the original O'Neil as best he can by fixing his pain, in this case, the pain for his lost son. It's fine tele-sf, with heart as well as fx, and it shows that the cast and crew of *STARGATE SG-1* have good intentions in doing a decent show, despite the fact that every civilization they've come in contact with so far speaks English real good.

Meanwhile, the Devlin-Emmerich duo have put their personal



John Corbett plays the Christ-like title character in *THE VISITOR*, the new Fox television show from the ID4 team of Dean Devlin and Roland Emmerich.

touch to *THE VISITOR* for Fox TV). I'm too young to remember the impact that *THE FUGITIVE* had in the '60s. All I know is the last episode was the highest rated in history until the nagging question of who shot J.R. had to be answered in 1980. Apparently, the shadow of poor Dr. Richard Kimble is a deep and dark one that extends to this new program, which also owes a heavy debt to John Carpenter's *STARMAN*.

In this program, a handsome and endearing flyboy from the 1940s (John Corbett) was abducted, experimented upon until he's damn near Christ-like, but then escapes, unaged, unencumbered with contemporary angst, and on the search for those who will make human history so he can send us all in the opposite direction of Armageddon. Meanwhile, an FBI team and a horribly gung ho army Colonel (Steve Railsback) are on the chase for the guy, each for their own misbegotten reasons.

Again, the recycled concept shows its resiliency, but does not cover the strain of overuse. There is some good stuff here, most of it coming from Corbett. It is in the

study of this new Redeemer whose life was taken from him that the program really shines. Results vary from show to show: not very impressive was the story in which his character Adam winds up with a homicidal cult leader planning to wipe out a two mile radius with condensed sound waves. The ties to the Heaven's Gate cult were clumsy and tasteless, and the drama of the story was tired and uninvolved. Better was an episode in which Adam walked into the life of a daffy scientist (Harry Shearer) whose work on anti-gravity not only offers hope for the future but frees the man's heart.

Unlike with *STARGATE SG-1*, Devlin and Emmerich are Executive Producers, with brother Ute Emmerich also serving on the making of *THE VISITOR*. How much actual input they have had beyond the first couple episodes is unknown, but the direction the show takes has promise. Although it may never share the groundbreaking qualities of *THE X-FILES* or *BABYLON 5*, *THE VISITOR* remains entertaining on a lesser, more familiar level. □

ANASTASIA

Directors: Don Bluth & Gary Goldman. Writers: Susan Gauthier, Bruce Graham, Bob Tzudiker, Noni White. Fox 11/97. 94 mins. Voices: Meg Ryan, John Cusack, Kelsey Grammer, Christopher Lloyd, Hank Azaria, Bernadette Peters, Angela Lansbury.

Opening with a melancholy tune from a music box, *ANASTASIA* unfolds with fabulous vistas that invoke fairy tale realm with their shimmering beauty. I am familiar with the tragic history of the Romanov family, but I put that aside in anticipation of a modern-musical fantasy. I was not disappointed. The song and dance numbers move the story along quickly without leaving one breathless. In true MGM musical form, "A Rumor in St. Petersburg," tells of the rumor of Anastasia's survival and imparts the fear of the Bolsheviks. A poignant and beautiful scene occurs when Anastasia stands in the dark and dusty Palace Ballroom, which fills with bright, vibrant dancers and memories. Conversely, during Rasputin's underworld number, I laughed, for there was the MGM trademark of a staircase filled with dancers—only these were creepy, crawly bugs! And, the Paris number with a Van Gogh-like background was just plain fun.

The characters were believable and humorous, combined with the exquisite artwork and the skillfully integrated 3D CGI. This is an excellent non-Disney animated film. Now, we know why the Mouse House is so upset.

●●● 1/2 Desiré Gonzales

AARON'S MAGIC VILLAGE

Director: Albert Hana Kaminski. Screenplay: Kaminski & Jacqueline Gala Benousilio, adapted from Isaac Bashevis Singer's "Stories for Children." CFP, 9/97. 80 mins. Voices: Fyvush Finkel, Tommy Michaels, Tovah Feldshuh, Ronn Carroll.

Director Albert Kaminski claims that what drew him to *AARON'S MAGIC VILLAGE* was the fact that most films of historical European Jewish life depict desperation and oppression; Kaminski sought to do something completely opposite—an ethnic film filled with humor, color, and music. Unfortunately, the director left out the humor, color, and music. He also left out the compelling plot, rich personalities, and fluid artistry that could have made the film something special.

The film opens promisingly, with stylish animation depicting angels flying over the countryside, distributing charm, wisdom, kindness, creativity, and foolishness; unfortunately, one angel dumps all of this foolishness in the village of Chelm. The story then follows a young boy named Aaron who saves Chelm from an evil sorcerer.

The characters look as if they've escaped from a *CARE BEARS* movie, and the songs and plot move along like something on Saturday morning TV. The one highlight is the rock-like Golem summoned by the sorcerer, which attacks Chelm in a visceral and well-orchestrated blend of traditional and computer animation. If only all the scenes had had this impact, then maybe *AARON'S MAGIC VILLAGE* would have been that special film that Kaminski wanted to make.

○ Mike Lyons

ANIMATION

By Mike Lyons

AARDMAN ANIMATION

Brilliant but little seen work now available on video.

With ingenuity reminiscent of Disney studio's early days, and a bold, graphic approach that harks back to the UPA look, Aardman Animation has made the "outdated" technique of stop-motion seem more timely than ever. Fox video recently mass-marketed a handful of Aardman's short subjects under the title, **CREATURE COMFORTS**. A sort of condensed version of the Aardman film festivals that have toured art house theatres in recent years, the video offers the title short, plus **WAT'S PIG**, **ADAM**, and **NOT WITHOUT MY HANDBAG**.

The Oscar-winning **CREATURE COMFORTS** is from director Nick Park (most famous to buffs for his creation of the min-marvels Wallace and Gromit). In **COMFORTS**, Park departed from his usually tight narrative for a quasi-documentary look at the life of zoo animals (using a technique developed by Aardman, which consists of synching the animation to edited tapes of audio interviews). Each animal—polar bear, koala, gorilla, etc.—speaks matter-of-factly, as if questioned by an interviewer (best of all is the indignant puma, who in a Brazilian accent, talks of how he misses the space of his homeland). **COMFORTS** is a wonderful match of voice and animation (reminiscent of John and Faith Hubley's free-form animated shorts of the '50s and '60s) that leaves the viewer agape at Park's ingenuity.

Also on the tape are Peter Lord's brilliant short subjects **WAT'S PIG** (reviewed in *CFQ* 29:2) and **ADAM**. **WAT'S PIG** uses stop-motion and split-screen to tell a skewed "Prince and the Pauper" story. **ADAM** hilariously relays what life must have been like for Earth's first denizen. In the short, completely devoid of dialogue, a hand reaches down from the heav-



NOT WITHOUT MY HANDBAG, looking a bit like **A NIGHTMARE BEFORE CHRISTMAS**, is one of the gems on a new Aardman video anthology.

ens, molding man out of a mass of clay, giving the audience a not-so-subtle metaphor for the animator-as-creator.

The most surrealistic effort on the compilation is **NOT WITHOUT MY HANDBAG**, directed by Boris Kossmehl. Looking like a Rankin-Bass Christmas special on acid, Kossmehl's film tells a bizarre yet extremely satirical and compelling story of a woman who finds that the small print on her washing machine warranty has forfeited her soul to the Devil. However, on the way to the nether regions, the woman's restless spirit realizes she has left behind her precious handbag, so she returns to the land of the living as a reanimated corpse. (Her young niece admirably overcomes her initial shock, happily proclaiming, "My auntie is a zombie from Hell!")

CREATURE COMFORTS is a great primer for those unfamiliar with Aardman's work. For

other devotees, the compilation is a great fix of this most creative and innovative of independent animation studios.

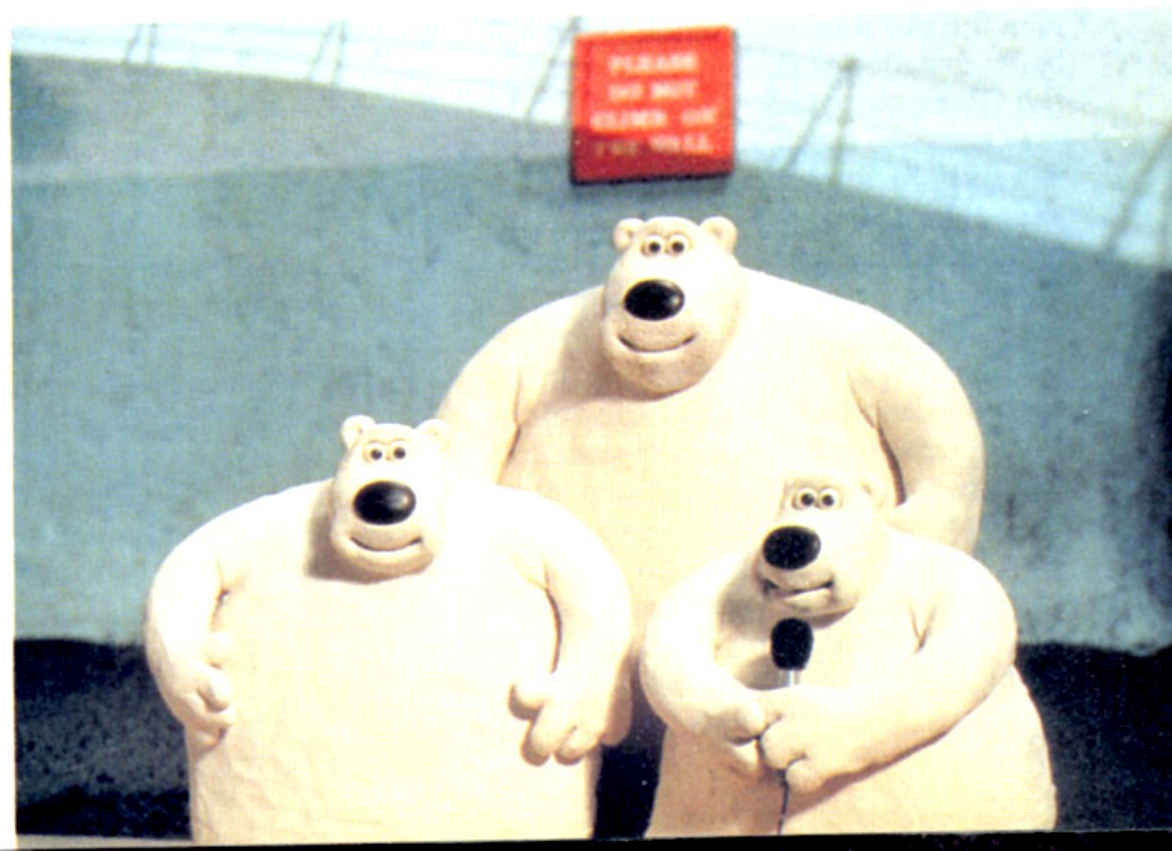
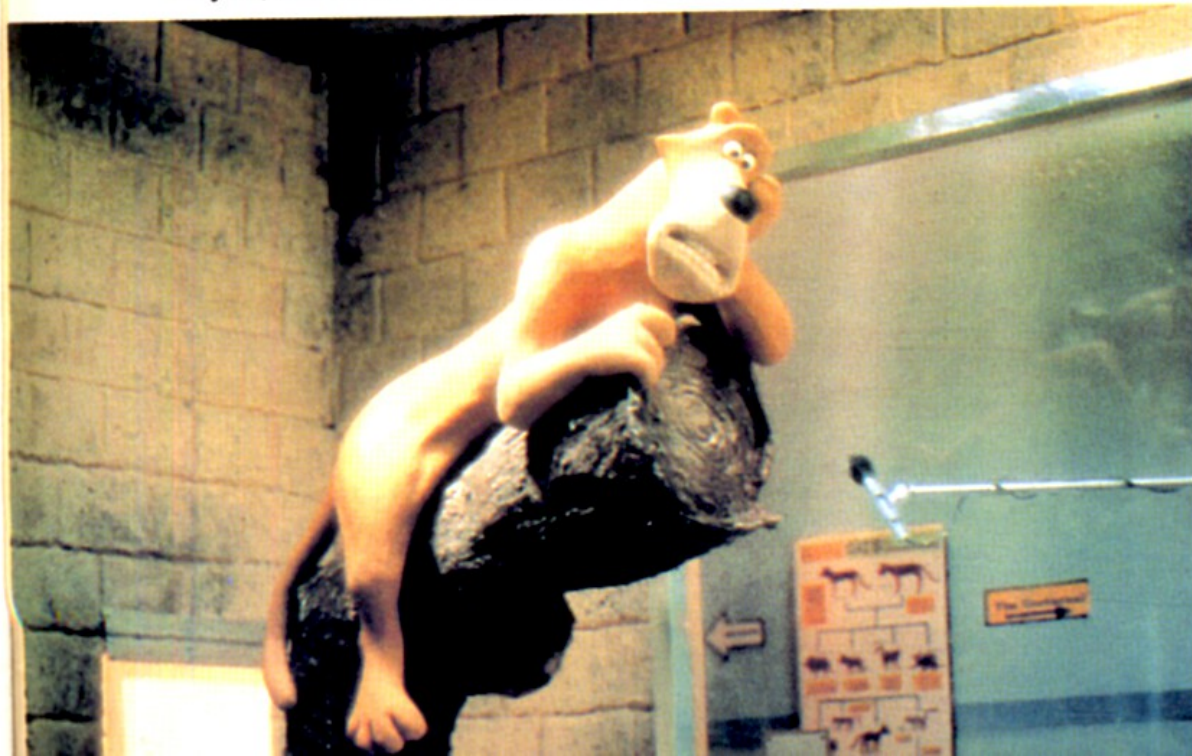
Also on video is **POOH'S GRAND ADVENTURE: THE SEARCH FOR CHRISTOPHER ROBIN** (Walt Disney Home Video, 8/97, G). This direct-to-video effort is a smart way to capitalize on the recent "Pooh craze." Unfortunately, Disney couldn't find a more substantial way to capitalize on it. This **POOH** (you'll excuse the expression) is extremely padded—a feature length film that could have been told in half an hour. The filmmakers have obviously used many of the early, theatrical **POOH** featurettes as their inspiration, especially in the sketchy, story-book quality of the backgrounds (many of which are impressive). They should have also looked at the running time of those short subjects

(30 minutes), which would have served this film better.

The story has Pooh and the gang set out to find Christopher Robin. This leads to many lethargic "action" scenes, which are meant to induce excitement but instead illicit yawns from the audience. The animation is passable (somewhere between theatrical quality and the static Saturday morning **POOH** series). Helping to keep things in check is nice attention to the characters' personalities, especially Tigger's sly asides (when Pooh becomes upset upon learning that Christopher has left for school, Tigger observes, "his very little brain is half gone with grief!").

POOH'S GRAND ADVENTURE does serve as a perfect electronic baby-sitter, but for those who don't need such distractions, it's a prime example of the fact that sometimes less is more. □

The video compilation takes its name from Nick Park's Oscar-winning short subject, **CREATURE COMFORTS**, in which animals tell of their life in a zoo.



ART HOUSE

By Dan Persons

UNDERMINING THE AMERICAN DREAM Wim Wenders unconvincingly envisions "the end of violence."

You think Wim Wenders "gets" America? **THE END OF VIOLENCE** (MGM, 9/97, 123 mins, R) attempts nothing less than to encapsulate the whole of this country's penchant for violence—its institutionalization by government agencies, its glorification in the media, its random reality—but instead suggests that the German director, who has used American iconography and actors as touchstones in many of his films, may be better off appreciating the U.S.A. from afar. Apparently keying off the mysterious final year of action producer Don Simpson, **END** starts off with jaded filmmaker



Above: In **THE END OF VIOLENCE**, Gabriel Byrne plays a surveillance expert engaged in a top secret project to blanket L.A. with hidden cameras. Left: Byrne and Marisol Padilla Sanchez as Mathilda. Right: Bill Pullman is a director of stylized, violent films who is framed for murder when he discovers the truth of the secret surveillance system.



Mike (Bill Pullman) undergoing a profound epiphany after being abducted by the Vladimir and Estragon of inbred, white-trash car-jackers (in L.A. yet!), and eventually draws into its orbit, amongst others, Mike's wife (Andie McDowell, simpering weirdly into her key light), who assumes the missing producer's dyspeptic mantle, and a surveillance expert (Gabriel Byrne) who, for reasons not wholly clear, may have marked Mike for death by sending the man the plans to a city-wide video spy system being installed in the control room of the Griffith Observatory (irony, y'see?).

There's so much juicy material here that one can only be stunned at how wrong Wenders gets everything. Why, when a Simpson-like producer should either be displaying the go-for-the-jugular viciousness of a major player or the lunge-for-the-Maalox angst of one who's had his fill of the industry, does Wenders choose the muted, glum Pullman for the role? How, if Wenders professes such a fascination for this country, can he introduce so clueless a character as a "gangsta" rapper who makes P.M. Dawn sound like the Notorious B.I.G. by comparison? What was Wenders thinking when he decided upon the borderline offensive treatment of the Mexican gardeners who rescue

Mike from his traumatic experience; or the bizarrely superficial invocation of U.S. South America policy; or the incorporation of the legendary but clearly out-of-it Sam Fuller (who died in October) in a disturbing, final appearance? Yes, it can be illuminating to see one's world through the eyes of another, but I get the feeling Wenders is so fascinated by his own imaginary vision of the U.S. that he hasn't dared consider what might be the truth beyond the fictions. My God, Ronald Reagan had a better grasp on American life than this.

Now, J. Michael McCarthy has the right idea. No less obsessed with the violent undertones of our society than Mr. Wenders, but far wiser, the comic-book artist-(*Kid Anarchy*; *Bang Gang*)-turned-grunge filmmaker has come up with **THE SORE LOSERS** (Big Broad Guerrilla Monster, 81 mins, unrated), a manic, pulp-lurid celebration of the dark, seamy underbelly of the American zeitgeist. Lovingly slapdash and surprisingly well-photographed and edited, this has to be the ultimate take-off on every exploitation-film trope that ever flashed its way across the stained, torn surface of a drive-in screen. It is every bit the invocation of the American spirit, and way more convincing than any of those rabidly patriotic pageants that Eisner likes to send down Disneyland's Main Street.

Granted, there's more than a whiff of Nihilism 101 to **LOSERS'** plot line of a punkish, fifties hoodlum (Jack Oblivion) who escapes from his exile in the supra-dimensional limbo of the "Lo-Fi Frequency" to join his psychotic, serial-killer soul-mates Mike (Mike Maker) and Kerine (Kerine Elkins—do these guys live their

roles, or what?) in a holy quest to claim the lives of twelve, random victims in the present-day South. But McCarthy is so eager to toss everything at hand into his cultural Mixmaster—including pre-code comic books, the Johnson Smith catalog, **BLOOD FEAST** producer David F. Friedman as psychic overseer The Elder, Japanese punk band Guitar Wolf as the Men in Black, and D'Lana Tunnell as a tattooed, beer-swilling, motorcycle-pumping sideshow performer (is your head buzzing yet?)—that his infatuation with the low-down and nasty overcomes all resistance. This has to be the filmic

equivalent of the memory-dump that your typical trailer-park teen undergoes upon awakening from an all-night binge of beer and **SPIDER BABY** screenings—you can taste the dust of the back-roads at the back of your throat, and smell the desperation and decay of all those red-



neck bars. It's a dirty feeling, sure, but it's a *good* dirty—we haven't had this grimily-immersive an experience in New York City since the Giuliani reelection campaign.

What we *have* had are the offerings of pretentious filmmakers who think they're pulling the chocks out from under the hoary old clichés, when all they're doing is showing their own ignorance of the medium. About the only excuse I can come up with for **OFFICE KILLER** (Strand Releasing, 12/97, 78 mins, unrated) is that director Cindy Sherman has never seen a horror movie, and has created this listless bit of body-count mayhem for similarly clueless audiences. Granted, using a mostly female cast (Molly Ringwald and Jeanne Tripplehorn co-star) is an interesting break from tradition, and there are some tentative stabs at bringing a woman's point-of-view to the personal alliances and competitive politics of the workplace. But here's a flash, Cindy: we already know the average American office is a banal environment—what's the point in making a story about a mousy, magazine fact-checker-cum-serial-killer (Carol Kane, doing Simka one more time) as wan and lifeless as the banalities you're supposedly deconstructing? Bottom line: this is no less a rote exercise than the most formulaic of the **ELM STREET** sequels. For genuine, workplace acid, one would still be well-advised to reach for—abracadabra, alakazam, bippity-boppity-boo—that stealth-classic of the '80s: **A SHOCK TO THE SYSTEM**. □

CINEMA

By Steve Biodrowski

THE MEN BEHIND THE CURTAIN *Filmmakers betray their own hand.*

Fictional, narrative art forms are inherently deceptive. The reader or viewer is asked to suspend disbelief and pretend that what's happening—whether on the page, stage, or screen—is real, while all the time the events are actually being manipulated by an unseen intelligence: the author, playwright, or director. How well we enjoy this deception often depends on its verisimilitude—the appearance of being real.

Of course, there is an alternative, albeit usually limited to self-consciously artistic fare: the artists can adopt a self-reflexive approach which announces that the work of art is in fact a work of art, not a form of reality. Thus, John Barth, in "Lost in the Funhouse," can diagram and describe the very dramatic devices that his short story is employing. Or Jean-Luc Goddard, in his masterpiece WEEK-END, can have one of the characters lament that he is trapped in a film where the only other characters he meets are weird.

Somewhere between these two is a middle position, in which the story itself incorporates a certain amount of manipulation from agencies outside the control of the protagonist. Therefore, the structure of the plot, with its conflicts and climaxes, is justified by the plot itself, and the filmmakers absolve themselves of accusations of undue manipulation.

Two recent films have adopted this approach with greater and lesser success: *THE GAME* and *A LIFE LESS ORDINARY*. In *THE GAME* (written by John Brancato & Michael Ferris), Michael Douglas' Nicholas Van Orton signs on for a mysterious Game that throws his life into chaos. The joke of the story is that the Game is deceiving Van Orton in the same way that *THE GAME* is deceiving the audience. Furthermore, the Game is not only creating obstacles and hardships for Van Orton; it is also (unbeknownst to him or us) leaving open avenues of escape for him, so that he may circumvent these obstacles. In effect, all the obligatory story-telling clichés (the hero overcoming adversity and experiencing some kind of personal growth as a result) are incorporated into the story, because that is what the Game is intention-

ally forcing Van Orton to achieve. By the end, the distinction between the Game and *THE GAME* has become so blurred that the film can take a fantasy leap (having Van Orton survive a fall off a high rise thanks to some break-away glass and an air bag). The manipulation of the practitioners of the Game becomes synonymous with the manipulation of the makers of *THE GAME*. (In a recent interview, director David Fincher somewhat disingenuously claimed that his film is not a cheat; it is a film *about* a cheat. The film itself makes no such distinction: the audience is along for as deceptive a ride as Van Orton is. In fact, when Van Orton seeks out his tormentors, stating, "I want to see the wizard," he could easily be talking about the film's director; had Fincher played a cameo as the Game's CEO it might have driven the point home for viewers who didn't get it.)

Part of what makes *THE GAME* work is that, for all its cinematic manipulation, the film really wants us to buy into Van Orton's story on an emotional level. His survival and transformation at the end is not just a clever piece of filmic legerdemain; it is a satisfying dramatic conclusion as well. Conversely, *A LIFE LESS ORDINARY* fares less well, because the filmmakers seem afraid to buy into the romantic love story that forms the basis for the plot. As a result, we are left with little but cinematic

cleverness—which is abundant enough to make the film worthwhile viewing but still leaves it falling short of its potential.

In the story, a rather unlikely pair (played by Ewan McGregor and Cameron Diaz) are slated by Heaven to fall in love, and two angels (Delroy Lindo and Holly Hunter) are dispatched to make sure this happens. Thus, the filmmakers have immediately absolved themselves of all the events contrived to make the characters fall in love. It's as if director Danny Boyle and writer John Hodge are saying, "We're not manipulating the events; Heaven is!"

The problem is that, with Heaven on their side, it is impossible to imagine how things could go wrong. This actually helps in some ways, taking the edge off most of the film's violence. But it hurts in a more fundamental way, because Boyle and Hodge have no clear idea how to keep the characters from falling in love much sooner than they do, which would have brought the film to a premature conclusion. In order to keep the movie running past the 90-minute point, they are forced to have the characters arbitrarily pull away from each other several times. Thus, by trying to justify their manipulations in the plot, the filmmakers are forced to even greater, *unjustified* manipulations (no reason is given for the characters' resistance to falling in love with each other) just to keep the



Michael Douglas finds himself pushed to the edge in *THE GAME*.

plot going.

Perhaps the story would have worked better if the identity of the angels had been kept secret until the end, so that their benign intentions would not have undermined the suspense (much as the intent of the Game was kept secret—and conceivably malevolent—until the surprise conclusion).

Clearly, Boyle and Hodge are having fun with the film medium, throwing together contrasting elements from *BONNIE AND CLYDE* and *STAIRWAY TO HEAVEN* in order to keep audiences off balance. To a large extent they succeed in making a film that is often unpredictable and occasionally wildly entertaining. A true highlight occurs when the angel Gabriel (Dan Hedaya) calls God on the phone to request a little Divine Intervention. Obviously not getting the response he hoped for (we hear only his side of the conversation), the exasperated angel replies, "With all due respect, sir, how could it possibly be beyond your control?"

That, of course, is the key question. Within the fictional framework of their art, nothing is really beyond the control of the filmmakers. The ending of *A LIFE LESS ORDINARY*, like that of any other film, is inevitable. The truly important point is how well the filmmakers exercise that control—whether overtly or tacitly. *THE GAME* pulls off its conceit with stylish aplomb, but *A LIFE LESS ORDINARY* betrays the best interests of its own narrative by opting for unnecessary complications when a simpler approach would have sufficed. □

A night in a karaoke bar segues to a fantasy musical dance sequence for Cameron Diaz and Ewan McGregor in *A LIFE LESS ORDINARY*.



VIDEOPHILE

By John Thonen

ATOMIC AGE ENTERTAINMENT

Rare cult titles available from Englewood Entertainment.

There are thousands of films on video, yet because of age or obscurity, some titles are not readily available. These are the films avid video collectors hunger to own. There's not enough demand for the major video companies, but films such as *DEVIL GIRL FROM MARS*, *WEREWOLF IN A GIRL'S DORMITORY*, *PLAY-GIRLS AND THE VAMPIRE*, and *BLOOD BULLETS & BUFFOONS* do have an audience. Catering to the needs of this true fanatic are speciality labels like Something Weird Video, Sinister Cinema, Video Search of Miami and many others who reach their target audience largely through ads in the back of film magazines.

Periodically, this column will look at some of these speciality video suppliers. Up first, a new kid on the block, Englewood Entertainment, who specialize in classic, and not-so-classic, films of the 50s and 60s—films they dub "Atomic Age Entertainment."

The company released its first six titles late in '96. *ROCKETSHIP X-M* ('50), *DESTINATION MOON* ('50), and the rarely seen *PROJECT MOONBASE* ('53) were among them. Strong sales encouraged founders Ben and Brian Mossman to release another 16, including *THE CRAWLING EYE* ('58), *KRONOS* ('57), and *WOMEN OF THE PREHISTORIC PLANET* ('66). With business still booming, Ben Mossman said he expects "to have nearly 50 titles available by early '97 and be releasing new titles at a rate of 1 every 10 days."

Englewood Entertainment licenses its titles from what they proudly proclaim, "The Wade Williams Collection." Williams' life-long film-collecting hobby (see *CFQ* 25:5:22) became an avocation when he began buying the copyrights to many of the titles in his personal film library. It was Williams, a long-time friend and business associate, who urged the Mossmans to attend the 1997 Video Software Dealers Of America show to sell Englewood's wares alongside video giants like Paramount. "Since the VSDA we have increased our business about tenfold," explained Ben. "Right now I have contracts from three companies wanting to stock our tapes,



The original Vampira (Milla Nurmi) and a recreation (Toni Griffin) in *THE HAUNTED WORLD OF ED WOOD*, available from Englewood Entertainment.

and I'm too busy filling orders to read them."

The Mossmans run Englewood Entertainment from offices atop the historic Englewood Theater in Independence, Mo. Williams bought the long-abandoned building, and the Mossmans helped in restoring its art deco glory. The theater specializes in theatrical play of older and classic films for the serious film buff, a repertoire similar to that of Englewood Entertainment.

Over the years, the licensing of Williams' copyright library has earned him a sizable income; however, he and the Mossmans always envisioned their own video label and made several modestly successful attempts. "This time is different," said Ben Mossman, "because we finally have all the pieces of the puzzle."

A key piece in that "puzzle" is Englewood's tape boxes, which feature original stills and artwork from the films. With neon-color schemes and a flashy combination of those original elements (often colorized from b&w originals), along with Williams knowledgeable and often amusing liner notes, the boxes have been a hit with fans and retailers alike.

Another important "piece" in Englewood's success was the recent rebirth of sci-fi popularity. "There was a time when there was little interest in old b&w films,"

explained Ben. "They thought they were passe. Now, a whole generation has grown up loving science fiction, but unfamiliar with the films that started it all. They want those films, and we have a lot of them."

To appeal to this new audience, as well as the long-time, dedicated collector, the Mossmans relied on marketing acumen they developed from running a video rental store out of the lobby of their Fine Arts Theater. They had come to feel that collectors were drawn to titles with a common link. Thus, another crucial part of the Mossman's "puzzle" was making each film part of a numbered collection, such as "Science Fiction Gold," "Modern Horror," "Hollywood Noir," and the up coming "Haunted Hollywood" and "Atomic Television."

"Atomic Television" will offer episodes of Williams' classic sci-fi TV library, including the seminal *SPACE PATROL*, along with *TOM CORBETT* and *TALES OF TOMMORROW*. "Haunted Hollywood" will premiere with the release of the critically praised *HAUNTED WORLD OF EDWARD D. WOOD JR.*, a documentary featuring seldom seen Wood footage and interviews with most of his "stable of stars."

Englewood is also offering some very unique titles such as *ATTACK FROM MARS*, a re-title

of *MIDNIGHT MOVIE MASSACRE*, itself derived from Williams' failed feature film based on the *SPACE PATROL* series. Then there's *REVENGE OF THE HIDEOUS SUN DEMON*, a hilarious redubbing of Robert Clarke's 50s no-budget-classic, featuring the voice of Jay Leno. Englewood also promises release of the silent classic, *DELUGE* ('33). Once considered a lost film, Williams has been working on restoring it for several years.

Ben Mossman is particularly proud of the visual quality of their offerings. "Some of our titles have been released before, but they weren't using Wade's prints," Ben explained. "These aren't scratchy 16mm copies done on a home-made film chain in somebody's basement. We may even assemble the tape from several different elements, if one print has a portion that's better than another. We are determined to do this right. Not just take the money and run."

So, if you ignore the owner-hype, how are Englewood Entertainment's tapes? Their releases to date are surprisingly good quality. These are prints nearing half-a-century in age, so expect a few to have a sound pop or color shift, but overall this is the best any of these films have looked in years. The purist will want to know that *ROCKETSHIP X-M*'s dreadful V-2 rocket footage has been replaced with Williams' controversial new effects footage, which he produced with the aid of Dennis Muren, the Skotak brothers and other effects masters. It's worth noting that *THE CRAWLING EYE* is taken from a U.S. release print, and hence lacks the headless torso glimpsed in the British version. Members of the movie-gaffe-squad will find a must-see moment when the cast of *WOMEN OF THE PREHISTORIC PLANET* break-up laughing after a light crashes to the studio floor. Almost as irresistible is *PROJECT MOONBASE*, scripted by no less than Robert Heinlein as a TV pilot, but seldom seen since its brief theatrical release. Also keep in mind that the rarity of *THE FLYING SAUCER* doesn't really make it any better a movie, and that not even Anthony Eisley or Mamie

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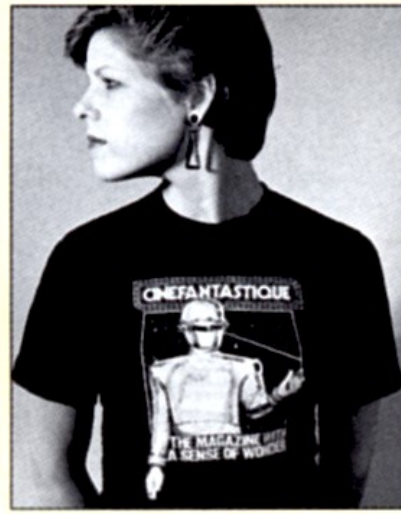
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Van Doren ever made a worse movie than *NAVY VS. THE NIGHT MONSTERS*.

While Englewood's library will be offered through various mail order video companies, and soon in many video stores, they also sell direct to the collector. You can contact them by phone (816-252-4288), FAX(816-836-3400) or visit their web site (www.Englewood.com). Whether you are a lover of classic sci-fi, or of movies so bad they're good, or just a completist who has to have a movie because, you just have to have it, odds are that Englewood Entertainment has some video pleasures in store for you. □

SPHERE

continued from page 15

the bottom of the ocean than we do about the surface of the moon. It's a hostile environment, and there are animals down there that nobody has seen alive, like giant squids. In fact, certain animals may appear as alien is if they came from outer space. For instance, some fish have no eyes, because there's no light at that depth of the ocean, so they've had to develop other means of sensory perception.

"It's a story that works on multiple levels," Wald concluded. "It's thought provoking, but it's also filled with action. You have at-

tacks by jellyfish and sea snakes, drowning, fires and they're at least six times when people will jump out of their seats. Barry Levinson's whole attitude towards making this film was you can make people tense and shock them, but you don't have to have chainsaws or load it with blood and gore." □

BLADE

continued from page 25

division," said Rabkin. "And the town had reached this arrangement with a tribe of vampires living in a housing development. The vampires would prey on the weak and old and leave everyone else alone if the townspeople didn't mess with the vampires. Then Blade comes into town and starts pushing at the structure—picking off a vampire here and there, breaking up a feeding—until it all comes down and the vampires declare war. The people are forced to fight back with Blade."

The project was one of several low-budget projects Rabkin was assigned to develop from Marvel properties. None of the properties, however, came to fruition. Many had legal entanglements that continue to this day. Another problem, according to Rabkin, was a lack of understanding about the comic genre. "All the executives had the standard attitude about comics:

they are stupid and campy and so we will make them funny. This was before [Tim Burton's] *BATMAN* came along, and no one had learned the lesson of Richard Donner's *SUPERMAN*. They all wanted to make these stupid, campy movies. I kept saying the thing that sets Marvel apart was the [motto] 'with great power comes great responsibility.' If you kept that in mind, many of those projects were foolproof."

More recently, a Japanese company created an animated version of the final two-year story arc of Wolfman's *Tomb of Dracula* series. Oddly enough, the one character left out of the story was Blade. Wolfman has nothing but praise for David Goyer's screenplay, on which the current film is based. "He respected the character," said Wolfman. "He had been a fan of the material and took several things from various issues and turned it into a very good story. On a creative level, I have no problems or complaints with anything they've done. Wesley Snipes is a great choice."

Wolfman does hope for some kind of financial compensation and on-screen acknowledgment of his creation of the character. The comic book business handled issues of copyright rather naively in the early '70s. No specific con-

tracts were signed specifying ownership of the Blade character. "I would love to get today's standard compensation deal on Blade," said Wolfman. "What I get at DC, and what Marvel gets today, is the writer and artist split 20 percent of whatever [the company] makes beside the comic. If Marvel were paid 100-grand for the rights, then 10-grand would come to me. If they make a million on the toys, then 100-grand would come to me. I would also love to receive a credit on the film as creator, which we are talking about."

Wolfman now lives in Los Angeles, where he is still involved with comic books as well as animation. He just sold an animated television series called *POCKET DRAGON ADVENTURES*, co-created with Craig Miller and based on the artwork of Real Musgrave. "I've done a lot of animation and still do comics. Marvel called me to do a Blade-Spiderman special. Strangely enough, they didn't call me up to do the movie adaptation. Marvel is always interesting. I have always felt Blade was one of the few characters that would make a wonderful movie series. Even back then, there was something about the character that resonated where a lot of other characters did not. I can see Blade continuing on as a series." □

DEVIL'S ADVOCATE

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As in the performances, the production design is at its best when it is subtle. The offices of Milton's firm have an appropriately subterranean look, and his private quarters are lit with an eerie glow reminiscent of the hellfire of his true realm. Although all the special-effects stops are pulled out during the final scenes, the computer-generated images are most effective when they are used to enhance the film's surreal dreaminess, as when Milton takes Kevin out onto his sparse rooftop water garden. "A lot of potential clients down there," he muses, as the two stand unprotected in the impossible setting high above Manhattan. Milton tempts with fantasy; and, in this fantastic place at the top of the world, anything seems possible. Mary Ann, whose conscience keeps her tied to reality, is not so easily deluded. In the midst of luxury, she catches horrifying glimpses of the monsters behind the beautiful faces surrounding her. Kept to a judicious minimum, these visions of demonic creatures (courtesy of makeup effects legend Rick Baker) are truly disturbing.

Unfortunately, the film exceeds the limits of its own allegory to offer more explanation than really needed. The final scenes, in which Kevin's relationship to his Satanic mentor are unnecessarily complicated, tend to undermine the real issue at hand—the battle over a single human soul torn between temptation and virtue. It's a shame, but one that is all too common in genre writing. Horror is most effective when supernatural evil reflects human corruption; subplots involving cosmic battles and fallen angels are little more than distractions from the genuinely relevant questions raised by the rest of the script. If the writers of *THE DEVIL'S ADVOCATE* had shown as much restraint as its actors and designers, this might have been a flawless film. □

TAYLOR HACKFORD

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felt very challenged by the arc of what she goes through in the film, and the experiences that she has. That dark stuff, to me, is right up my alley."

Hackford, according to Theron, is very much a director who works with the Method, in which the actors emotionally become their characters and remain that way throughout the shoot. "It was the first time I worked like that, that



DEVIL'S ADVOCATE: strong performances by Al Pacino and Keanu Reeves keep the film believable, even as the script piles on the supernatural conspiracy.

intensely," said the actress. "I never took off the wedding band. Taylor never called me Charlize; he always called me by my character name. I loved it. He's the kind of director who gives you all the feathers you need to fly. And he trusted me with a very important character, and I thanked him for giving me the opportunity to play her."

The isolation her Method performance afforded, as well as the discomfort of working during a New York winter, helped the actress stay focused on her job and kept her from being overwhelmed by her famous co-stars. "I loved working with Keanu," she said. "He is so solid and breathtaking in this film. I loved what we had together. And the same with Al. Al, to me, can never be bad. He does it with such conviction that he could fool me any day. He's fearless; he takes risks; he gambles. Sometimes he loses, but he does it with such conviction that he's always good because he works with his heart, constantly. I think that comes with time, experience and living life a lot longer than I have—that makes him the unique actor who portrays these unique characters for us."

Hackford's intention with *THE DEVIL'S ADVOCATE* was always to devise a film that became more intense as it progressed, allowing the fantasy elements to heighten the drama rather than exist as the focus of the film. "The film, I hope, works as a roller coaster ride," said the director. "It

starts in reality and progresses further and further into the phantasmagorical, but it does it subtly, and the effects that we have happen very quick and knife-like. I wanted the audience to go, 'Did I see that or not? Was there something there? Am I losing my mind? What's going on here?' Those moments create an insidious nature that's good in a nice, creepy movie. It's a movie that has a certain dark tone: you're watching it; it's seductive; it's pulling you in; but at the same time there might be something down there that I don't want to see. I think as the film progresses, hopefully we do it in such a way that it's always changing; there's always a surprise. If you go to a movie, sit there for a good period of time and be surprised and also get to an ending that really delivers, then what more can you ask?"

Special attention was paid to the ending, an extended tour de force for Pacino and Reeves devised to give a final punch to all that had come before it. "The scene at the end of the film was designed over a course of weeks," said Hackford. "We wrote it at the very beginning of the film and would rework it and rework it and rework it. We all knew that we were taking a terrible chance. It's a movie that's run almost two hours, and then you have this final scene. It was a fantastic, phantasmagorical moment. The film has gone on in a very realistic context, and all of a sudden Keanu walks out into 57th Street in New York City and

it's empty. You start to realize, 'Oh my God, I'm entering another realm.' When you walk into John Milton's apartment at the end of the film, you realize that you're in a very different environment.

"The John Milton character no longer has to be subtle," continued Hackford. "All artifice is dropped. It's a big moment. Now, I have an actor, Al Pacino, who's brilliant and capable of incredible subtlety, but he also has the gift of language at hand. I think this was beautifully-written by Tony Gilroy. It had all of our ideas in it—mine, Al's, Keanu's, everybody's at this point—but Tony was able to seam that together into a fabric that really is strong. When Al gives voice to those words, it's like an opera. He really is doing an aria. It's funny and scary and provocative and serious all at once. It's also very dangerous when you do a scene like that because if you miss it, you can fall flat on your face and the whole movie has gone for naught. We rehearsed it, and then we went in and took our chances."

THE DEVIL'S ADVOCATE, like many a Faustian tale before it, offers a moral for our times. Temptation, free will, societal pressure all drive us to make choices that affect not only our lives but the lives of those around us. "You have to take into account and be responsible for your actions," said Reeves. "A selfish point of view is harmful, and you will not only lose loved ones, but you'll lose the capability to be loved. You're your own devil. God and devil exist inside and outside of you. You must take responsibility for that."

"The movie gives you the opportunity to see what happens if you get to make the choice twice," added Theron. "I think what the movie is trying to say is that doesn't happen in real life. It makes you want to think twice about your decisions in life, what you truly want, and what's really important to you." □

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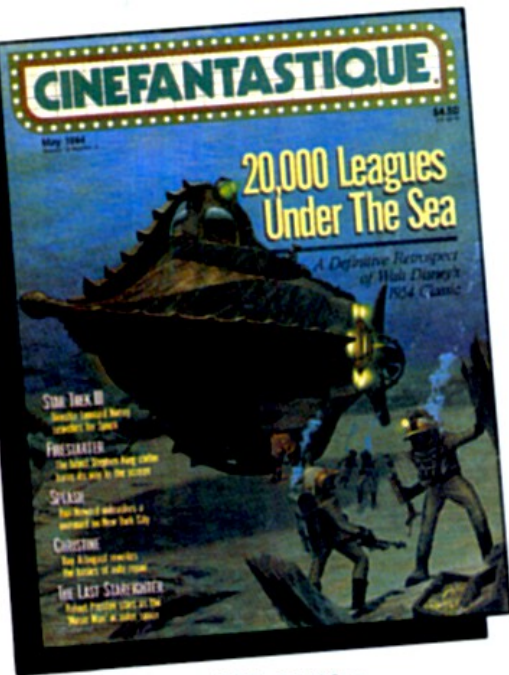
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